

Lesson 31 – CONFLICT – Devadatta Divides the Sangha

Many people lost respect for Devadatta because he tried to kill the Buddha. But Devadatta still had some of the Buddha’s student monks as friends, and they often went together as a big group to eat lunch at the homes of families in the area. They would tell the family whatever they wanted the family to offer to them before they arrived at the home. This annoyed the families. They complained to each other about the monks, saying:

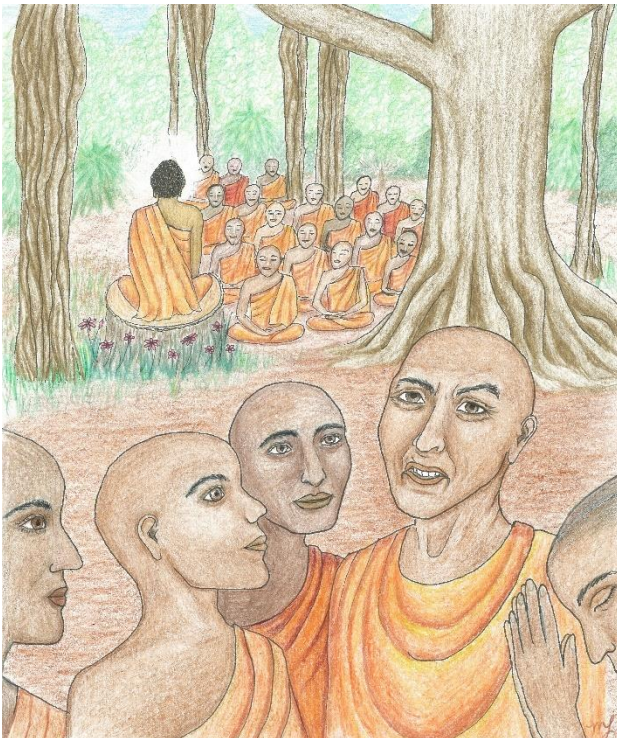
“How can the monks, sons of the Sakyans, go and eat together among families, informing them beforehand of whatever they want? Everyone enjoys nice things; these monks are no different from ordinary people.”

The other Buddhist monks also were annoyed by the behavior of Devadatta and they told the Buddha about it.

The Buddha then asked Devadatta whether it was true that he was going in large groups to eat at families’ houses after telling them what they wanted the family to offer them.

Devadatta replied, “It is true, Lord.”

The Buddha told him it was wrong to do that, and then gave a talk on the Dharma. He made a rule that the monks should go in groups of not more than three to a family’s home. That would be more compassionate to families, who then wouldn’t have to prepare food for so many people. Also, it would avoid causing conflict among the monks.



Devadatta later met with some monks who were his friends. Referring to the Buddha disrespectfully as “the monk Gautama,” Devadatta said to them,

“Let’s create a disagreement and conflict in the monk Gautama’s Sangha,” the community of monks.

A monk named Kokālika replied, “The monk Gautama is mighty and powerful, friend. How can we do that?”

Devadatta replied, “Let’s go to the monk Gautama and demand five new rules that would make a monk have fewer attachments and more

self-discipline. The monk Gautama will never grant such a request. We can tell people that he refused to grant this request, and, because people admire self-discipline, that will create a disagreement and conflict among the monk Gautama's Sangha.

Devadatta wanted people to think he was more self-disciplined—and therefore better—than the Buddha.

So, Devadatta went with his friends, who were also his followers, to visit the Buddha and said to him,

“Lord, you say it is good to have few wishes, to be content, to be dedicated to self-control, and to get rid of attachments. Here are five rules that will lead to these things: (1) monks must live in the forest their whole life, not in villages; (2) they must only beg for food, not receive food by invitation; (3) they must wear only rags for robes, and not accept robes given by people; (4) they must only live under trees, not in a building; and (5) they must not eat any fish or meat. If a monk violates any rule, he gets punished. I propose you accept these rules.”

The Buddha said, “Let him who wishes to live in the forest and him who wishes to live in a village do so; let him who wishes to eat begged-for food and him who wishes to accept invitations do so; let him who wishes to wear rags and him who wishes to wear robes from householders do so; and let him who wishes to live at the root of a tree do so for eight months of the year but not during the rainy season. I have allowed fish and meat to be eaten if it is not seen or heard or suspected to have been killed for the monk personally.”

Devadatta was happy that his plan worked, saying, “The Buddha does not grant these five rules.”

He and his followers bowed to the Buddha and left. Devadatta went to the town of Rajagaha, and told the people about the five rules that he proposed and the Buddha refused to accept, and told them that he and his followers choose to live according to the five rules.

The unwise people were persuaded by Devadatta, thinking, “These monks are really self-controlled, but the monk Gautama lives in luxury, thinking of luxury.”

The wise people were annoyed hearing Devadatta, and said, “How can Devadatta try to create disagreement and conflict in the Sangha?”

Some monks heard about what Devadatta said to the people and reported it to the Buddha, who then asked him,

“Devadatta, is it true that are you trying to create a disagreement and conflict in the Sangha?”

Devadatta, knowing the Buddha could read his mind, admitted, “It is true, Lord.”

The Buddha told him, “Don’t create a disagreement and a conflict in the Sangha. He who breaks the Sangha’s harmony will experience extreme misery due to karma, cause and effect. But he who reunites the Sangha, who brings peace to the community of monks that is in conflict, will experience great merit and enjoy the next life in a heaven-world. Do not try to create a conflict in the Sangha; it is a very serious thing.”

The next morning, when Venerable Ananda went out to receive food in the town, Devadatta saw him and said, “Friend Ananda, from today I will carry on with my monks apart from the Buddha and his monks.”

Devadatta then met with many monks and had them vote on whether they would follow his five extra rules that the Buddha refused to accept. Five hundred new monks who had not yet learned much from the Buddha voted in favor of Devadatta’s rules. So, Devadatta took these five hundred monks with him to another town.

Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Moggallana told the Buddha about what Devadatta had done. The Buddha responded,

“Don’t you feel compassion for those new monks, Sariputta? Go to them before they come to ruin.”

Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Moggallana traveled to where Devadatta was teaching a large crowd of monks.

Seeing the two highly respected senior monks approaching, Devadatta proudly announced, “See, monks, I am teaching the Dharma well. Even the chief disciples of the monk Gautama, Sariputta and Moggallana, come to me and come over to my teaching.”

Kokālika warned, “Friend Devadatta, do not trust them. There’s something evil about it.”

Devadatta was delighted with the thought that the Buddha’s greatest monks wanted to hear him teach, and said, “No, friend, they are welcome since they have come to follow my teaching.”

Devadatta offered half of his large seat to Venerable Sariputta so they could sit together, but Sariputta and Moggallana sat in another place.

After he taught for most of the evening, Devadatta turned to Venerable Sariputta and said, very much like the Buddha would say, “Friend Sariputta, the monks are not yet tired or drowsy. Perhaps you would like to give a talk on the Dharma. My back is hurting me, so I will rest it.”

Venerable Sariputta accepted his invitation to teach. Devadatta then lay down on his right side in the same posture that the Buddha usually lays down, and he fell asleep.

Venerable Sariputta taught Dharma to the crowd, advising them on topics they wished to hear by reading their minds with his supernatural powers. Then Venerable Moggallana advised the crowd with the Dharma also using his supernatural powers, until people in the crowd deeply understood the Dharma, and had a pure vision of how everything in the world arises and disappears.

Then Venerable Sariputta said, “Monks, we are going back to the Buddha. Whoever believes in the Buddha’s Dharma, come with us.”

Then Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Moggallana, along with the five hundred monks, started walking to Bamboo Grove, where the Buddha was staying.

Kokālika woke Devadatta, saying, “Friend Devadatta, get up! The monks have been led away by Sariputta and Moggallana! Didn’t I tell you not to trust them, because they have evil intent?”

Devadatta was so angry and jealous that he felt like hot blood was gushing from his mouth.

When Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Moggallana arrived back at the Buddha’s monastery, they reported to the Buddha what happened. The Buddha told them and the other monks that Devadatta will die a miserable death because he tried to imitate the Buddha. He said that Devadatta’s mind is obsessed with eight things: getting things he wants and not getting them, being famous and not being famous enough, being honored and not being honored, evil wishes and evil friends. As a result of those obsessions, he will suffer in the future. So, the Buddha advised the monks to constantly try to overcome those eight things. He told the monks that Devadatta fell into negativity by his evil wishes, evil friends, and stopping his spiritual efforts once he got supernatural powers.

Questions:

1. What did Devadatta want people to think about him when he asked the Buddha to accept the five new rules? (he wanted people to think he was better than the Buddha)
2. What kind of trouble did Devadatta want to cause by asking the Buddha to accept the five new rules? (he wanted to create a disagreement and conflict in the Buddha’s community of monks)
3. Did the Buddha agree to those five new rules? (no)

4. Which monks voted in favor of Devadatta's five rules and decided to follow him? (500 new monks who had not yet learned much from the Buddha)
5. Why did Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Moggallana visit Devadatta? (to bring the monks back to the Buddha)
6. What eight things did the Buddha say that Devadatta was obsessed with? (getting things he wants and not getting them, being famous and not being famous enough, being honored and not being honored, evil wishes, and evil friends)

What the Buddha said:

“Jayam veram pasavati, dukkham seti parājito, upasanto sukham seti, hitvā jayaparājayam.”

“Victory causes enemies; the defeated live in pain. Happily the peaceful ones live, rejecting both victory and defeat.”

Dhammapada 201 (15:5)

Dharma discussion - Conflict:

Devadatta intensely wanted fame, popularity and admiration, so much that even though he was a monk, he was willing to do terrible things to get it. He was so greedy for power-- “power hungry.” Have you heard that term before? And Devadatta was charming enough—he had enough charisma—that he was able to persuade people to follow him. He knew that he could gain power over people by stirring up trouble—causing others to complain, have disagreements, argue and have conflicts.

The Buddha knew that when people have big disagreements and conflicts, they are distracted, upset, and unable to focus on work, studies and meditation. They waste a lot of time and energy arguing and making strategies against opponents. So, the Buddha made efforts to protect the community of monks from Devadatta or anyone else trying to stir up disagreements and conflicts.

In all kinds of situations, when someone wants to win against a rival or wants to control others, they might use the strategy of stirring up disagreements and conflicts—the “divide and conquer” strategy.

Have you ever seen someone cause a conflict between friends?

They may do that to make a friend join them and leave the other friend.

Some people like to cause arguments and disagreements because they don't like to see others being happy and peaceful.

And some are just bored and enjoy arguing or seeing others argue and fight.

How do people start the conflict? What do they do to get people angry? They may complain or say bad things about a person, or insult, ridicule, reject or bully them, spread rumors, or influence or control others by peer pressure. Although in general, voting is good, Devadatta made the monks vote on his rules as a type of peer pressure. These are all examples of people creating conflict for selfish reasons.

How can we avoid getting caught up in unnecessary conflicts, such as when someone is trying to influence us or pressure us to agree with something? We should try to be aware of that person's character by observing their behavior. Are they often helpful to other people, or only to certain friends? Are they a loyal friend or do they sometimes seem not to care? Are they genuinely kind and caring, or do they seem selfish? Do they make you feel uncomfortable? If you don't feel you can really trust them, it's probably better to avoid them or avoid agreeing with them when they're trying to influence or pressure you. If the 500 new monks had been more aware of Devadatta's unkind and selfish character, they could have avoided getting involved in his scheme.

Are there ever good reasons for argument or conflict? Yes! Can you think of any? Argument, when it's respectful, is an appropriate way to solve a disagreement. Also, it's important to speak up if you or someone else is being harmed or may be harmed—*actually* harmed, not just when you are disappointed over something unimportant, like getting another piece of candy. When someone is doing something harmful to another, we may need to stand up for what's right by questioning them or pointing out what they are doing wrong. How might they respond if we do that? They may argue, shout, be angry and start a big conflict. But if out of kindness we're protecting someone from harm, it's a good karma.

We also can make good karma by being a peace-maker—helping people who are in a conflict to find a peaceful solution. Have you ever helped others solve their conflict? How did you do it? You might start by helping them feel calm and comfortable, and then listening carefully to the person or people on each side of the conflict tell their point of view—their side of the story—one side first, and then the other side. You can ask them questions so you fully understand their side of the story. Next, you can see if there are some facts they can agree on, and you can help clarify the exact points of disagreement. Then, maybe you can try to help them agree on any of those points, which might lead to a solution. For example, one side might agree the other side was correct. Or, have each side suggest possible solutions to their conflict and help them agree on a solution that both sides feel is acceptable, even if it's a compromise, or not exactly what one or the other side wants. Or you can suggest someone else who can help them, such as a school counselor.

This process is called mediation. Maybe you can try being a mediator if your friends or siblings have a conflict!

Activity - Mock mediation:

Two students choose a topic for dispute, and then choose which position to argue: one argues in favor of making a change and the other argues against making a change (or in favor of a different change). Each presents their position in the dispute, with detailed arguments and facts to support their position. A third student acts as a mediator to help the two find a solution they can agree on.

Here are some sample disputes:

1. Lunch time should be longer at school.
2. School should start and end later (or earlier) in the day.
3. There should (or should not) be a required one-hour time period during the school day for students to do homework with a teacher available for guidance.
4. We should have a class for environmental studies at school.
5. We should (or should not) have physical education as a required class in school.
6. We should (or should not) have art (or music) as a required class in school.

Here is a general framework for a mediation:

1. The person arguing to make a change explains their point of view, why they want the change, their concerns, and any facts (or pretend facts) to support it. Next, the person who is arguing against that change explains their point of view—why they don't want the change, or why they want a different change—and their concerns, and facts (or pretend facts) to support it. The mediator listens carefully and can ask them questions for them to answer so everyone can fully understand their views.
2. Next, the mediator thinks about whether there are any facts they all can agree on, and if so, asks whether they will agree to those facts.
3. The mediator states the facts on which they still disagree, and summarizes each side's concerns and arguments, to clarify and summarize the dispute.
4. The mediator asks each side whether they have any possible solutions that might also satisfy the other side's concerns, perhaps with some compromises. The mediator helps them agree on a solution that both sides feel is acceptable, even if it's a compromise, or not exactly what one or the other side wants.