

Lesson 29 – OBEDIENCE - Nagasamala and Meghiya

One day the Buddha was on a journey with a monk called Venerable Nāgasamāla who was serving as the Buddha's assistant. They were walking along a path, or dirt road. After having walked for a few hours, Venerable Nāgasamāla saw that a little distance ahead of them, the path split into two directions. They had to decide whether to follow the path going toward the right or to follow the path going toward the left.

Venerable Nāgasamāla pointed to the path on the left and said, "Lord, this is the way. Let's go this way."

The Buddha pointed to the road on the right and replied, "This is the way, Nāgasamāla. Let's go this way."

Venerable Nāgasamāla was sure that the road on the left was a much shorter way to their destination that could save them a lot of time.

He again pointed to the left and said, "Lord, that is the way."

The Buddha again pointed to the right and said, "Nāgasamāla, this is the way."

Venerable Nāgasamāla was frustrated that the Buddha did not agree with him.

For the third, time, he pointed to the left and firmly said, "Lord, *that* is the way."

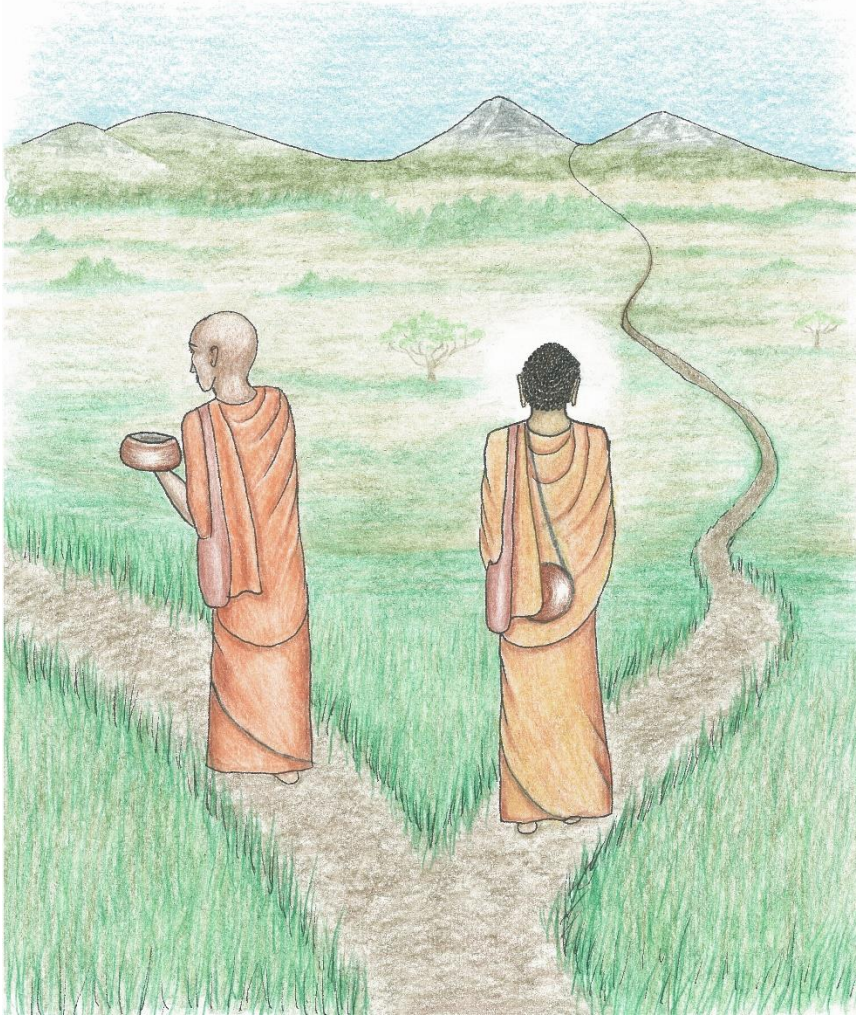
For the third time, the Buddha again pointed to the right and said, "Nāgasamāla, this is the way."

The Buddha knew something that the monk didn't know. But Venerable Nāgasamāla was thinking only about what made sense to him—that they should take the shortest path to their destination. It was very clear to him which path to take, and he couldn't understand why the Buddha didn't agree with him. He also didn't like to be told that he was wrong. His frustration turned into anger.

He was determined to take the path that he knew was the shortest. He had been carrying the Buddha's bowl and outer robe all along, and if the Buddha was not going to follow his advice on which path to take, he had to give those things back to him. But he was so angry, he just bent down and put them on the ground.

The Buddha did not get upset about this misbehavior, but just said, "My bowl and robe, Nāgasamāla?"

Stubbornly, Venerable Nāgasamāla did not answer and did not move. He was too angry to respond. So the Buddha bent down and picked up his robe and bowl, slinging them over his shoulder to carry them himself. He slowly walked alone up the path to the right.



Venerable Nāgasamāla walked alone along the path to the left. He felt sure that the Buddha would notice his mistake and come quickly to the path on which Venerable Nāgasamāla was walking. He walked confidently without looking back.

Suddenly, he heard a noise coming from the direction of some bushes next to the road, and the next moment, several robbers crawled out from behind the bushes.

One of them immediately hit him on the head and another one kicked him. One of them broke his bowl, slamming it down onto the road, and another took his upper robe and tore it.

After they ran away, Venerable Nāgasamāla noticed that his head was bleeding and his robes were badly torn. He picked up the pieces of his broken bowl. He was in shock. Wishing to be with the Buddha again, he turned around. He walked very quickly with his torn robe and broken bowl back to the split in the road and then walked along the road that the Buddha had chosen. He finally caught up to the Buddha and called out to him.

The Buddha stopped, and Venerable Nāgasamāla bowed with deep respect and devotion and told him what had happened.

The Buddha said, “A wise man and a foolish man walked and lived together. The wise leave what they know is bad.” The Buddha meant that when a person who has not yet developed wisdom is with a wise person, he should follow the advice of a wise person, who knows to get away from what is bad.

On another occasion, Venerable Meghiya was serving as the Buddha's assistant. One morning, he went to the Buddha and said,

“Lord, I want to go to Jantugrama to receive food offerings.”

The Buddha replied, “It's time to do as you think is right, Meghiya.”

Venerable Meghiya took his bowl and outer robe and went to Jantugrama. He went up to some houses, where people put some food into his bowl. On his way back to where the Buddha and the monks were staying, he walked along the side of a river. During his walk he saw a place where there were many mango trees.

He thought, “This beautiful and inviting mango grove is a good place to stay for the spiritual practice of a person who seeks to practice. If the Buddha allows it, I shall come to this mango grove to practice.”

With great inspiration to meditate intensely in the mango grove, he went to the Buddha and told him about it. The Buddha's reply was,

“Wait, Meghiya, we are still alone. Wait until some other monk comes.”

Venerable Meghiya did not understand why he should have to wait in order to get permission from the Buddha to meditate. Why should he have to wait?

Venerable Meghiya said, “There is nothing more left for you to do, Lord. But we monks still have something left to do. We need to practice. If it is allowed, Lord, I would like to go to that mango grove for my spiritual practice.”

For the second time, the Buddha's reply was, “Wait, Meghiya, we are still alone. Wait until another monk comes.”

Venerable Meghiya, feeling impatient, was insistent, and asked again. He didn't want to simply obey—to wait as the Buddha told him to do—because he didn't see any reason to wait.

The Buddha, however, knew that it was not the right time for Venerable Meghiya to be able to meditate well. Nevertheless, he replied,

“Since you say ‘practice,’ Meghiya, what can I say to you? It is time for you to do now as you think is right.”

Venerable Meghiya bowed and left to go to the mango grove, where he sat down under a tree for his daytime meditation practice. He was looking forward to having a great meditation now that he was in such a beautiful place.

But that didn't happen. He started to have many negative thoughts. He even had horrible thoughts of hatred, harming others and cruelty.

He thought, “It is surprising, here I am a monk who has left home and family life and yet I am harassed by these evil, unwholesome thoughts!”

In the evening, he went back to the Buddha and told him what happened.

The Buddha said, “Meghiya, when a person has not yet reached the goal, five things will lead him toward the goal: First, a monk has good friends and companions. Second, a monk is perfect in virtue, obeying the monks’ rules, restraining himself to avoid doing even small misbehaviors. Third, he speaks in accordance with the Dharma on subjects leading to enlightenment. Fourth, he lets go of unwholesome things and is persistent in doing wholesome things. Fifth, a monk has understanding and wisdom that leads to the end of suffering.”

The Buddha said further, “But in order to be established in those five things, a monk should, in addition, do these four things: give up attachment to the body to reduce desires, have lovingkindness to get rid of hatred, practice mindfulness of breathing to stop the rambling thoughts in the mind, and remember impermanence.”

He continued further, “Bad thoughts and useless thoughts come and tempt the mind. Not understanding these thoughts, the mind chases after them. A man who understands these thoughts gets rid of them with mindfulness. And one who is enlightened is done with them all, because no more temptation stirs up his mind.”

Questions:

1. Why didn’t Venerable Nāgasamāla agree with the Buddha about which path to take? (he was sure that the path to the left was much shorter and would save them a lot of time)
2. How did Venerable Nāgasamāla feel when the Buddha wouldn’t agree with him on the path to take? (frustrated and angry)
3. Why didn’t Venerable Nāgasamāla give the Buddha his bowl and robe? (he was angry)
4. Why didn’t Venerable Meghiya obey the Buddha’s instruction to wait? (he didn’t see any reason to wait)
5. What happened to them when they did what they wanted to do, against the Buddha’s instruction? (Venerable Nāgasamāla got beaten by robbers, and Venerable Meghiya had bad thoughts when he was trying to meditate)
6. What did Venerable Nāgasamāla and Venerable Meghiya learn? (they should follow the Buddha’s advice, they should obey his instructions)

What the Buddha said:

**“Karaṇīyaṃ atthakusulena, yaṃ taṃ santaṃ padaṃ abhisamecca,
Sakko ujū ca sūjū ca, suvaco c’assa mudu anatimāni.”**

“One who does good, who wishes to skillfully attain peace, should act this way: One should be able, straight, upright, obedient, gentle and humble.”

- Karaṇīyametta Sutta

Dharma Discussion - Obedience:

In the story we heard about not obeying instructions.
Also the Buddha mentioned obeying the monks’ rules.
When you hear the word “obey,” do you think of a particular person or situation?
Maybe you think of obeying your parents, or obeying your teachers.
Or you think of obeying classroom rules, or obeying rules of a game or sport.
Or obeying laws such as traffic laws, or obeying rules at a swimming pool.
Maybe you think of training a pet to obey you.

Think for a moment about what would happen if we had no rules and if no one ever told us what to do and not to do.
It could be dangerous—we and others could be injured.
And there would be chaos—too much disturbance, confusion and distraction.
So, why is it important to obey rules, and obey parents and teachers?
To protect us and others from harm, danger and chaos.

The Buddha’s students—his monks—were supposed to obey him as their teacher.
But, like students in our modern world, sometimes they didn’t obey.
Why didn’t Venerable Nāgasamāla just follow the Buddha’s advice on the path to take, and why didn’t Venerable Meghiya just obey the Buddha and wait?
Because they thought they knew better than the Buddha; they didn’t see any reason to do what he said.

Have you ever been in a similar situation, where a parent or teacher asked you to do something, and you didn’t see any reason to do what they told you to do, so you didn’t do it?
Or you didn’t want to obey because you think your parent or teacher is being too strict?
If you ignore them, complain, or ask “why,” how do you think they’ll react?
They may think you’re just trying to avoid doing what they’re asking you to do, and get frustrated or upset with you.
What might be a better way to respond?
Tell them your reason for not obeying—explain why you think you shouldn’t do what they are asking you to do.

Even if you feel impatient, like the monks in the story, try to have compassion for your parents and teachers.

Consider that they are trying to make a peaceful, orderly environment for everyone, and it's good for you to support that.

You may not always agree with them, and like the monks in the story you might think you know better.

Of course, parents and teachers can make mistakes, and you might know something they don't know.

But if they have good values and a good heart, appreciate that they have wisdom from many years of experience and are trying to guide you in the best way they know.

Also, when you don't agree with what a parent or teacher asks you to do, consider whether they may be stressed, in a hurry or busy and don't have time to discuss whether you should obey them or not.

At those times it's best to just obey them even if we don't agree, as long as no one could be harmed.

What if you're so angry or upset, like Venerable Nāgasamāla, that you don't want to do what a parent or teacher tells you to do?

Emotions or moods can make us feel overwhelmed, especially when we are being told what to do.

Sometimes we need to take time to calm down before we are ready to respond appropriately.

So, what can you do in that situation, instead of responding with anger?

You can ask for a little time to calm down first.

Some young people have a habit of refusing to do what a parent or teacher instructs or advises them to do, or they question everything they are asked to do. For example, have you seen someone who, when directed to do something by a parent or teacher, often asks "why?" or "why do I have to do it?"

Or someone who often just ignores what the parent or teacher says?

Or someone who often shouts or complains loudly when asked to do something?

Or someone who often violates rules, such as classroom rules?

These people disrupt the classroom, the family, or whatever environment they are in, making it unpleasant.

Their behaviors are the result of causes and conditions.

Can you think of some reasons why they behave that way?

Maybe these kids have difficulties with family, or they've suffered some trauma, so they don't trust or respect others, or can't stand being told what to do.

They may have learned bad behaviors from social media, other kids, or adults who are abusive and uncaring. Maybe they crave attention and conflict.

In any case, they are suffering, so we can be compassionate and wish that they overcome their problems and suffering, and learn the value of obeying rules and not being disruptive.

Instead of having those good thoughts, some young people follow the disobedient and disrespectful behavior of others, thinking they are tough, fierce and powerful. And then they get the attention they want.

More people nowadays, including adults, think that acting disrespectful toward others shows power over them.

So kids who also want that power and attention follow or imitate those behaviors. Have you ever noticed any kids who do that?

They don't know how to be strong, powerful and in control in a constructive way, by developing their mind through the Dharma.

So they try to be powerful in a way that's destructive, by harming others, following foolish behavior, and creating negative karma for themselves.

Their behavior is a reminder to us of what not to do, and not to follow the disrespectful behavior of other people, but instead to think for ourselves what is the right thing to do, according to the Dharma.

Activity:

The popular game "Simon Says" changed to "Wise one says":

Students stand next to each other at a starting line, facing another student who is the leader. The leader quickly gives the other students commands such as "Wise one says touch your toes," "Wise one says turn around," "Wise one says touch your nose," "Wise one says raise your hands," "Wise one says hands on your hips," "Wise one says jump," or "Wise one says raise your right foot."

Occasionally the leader gives a command without saying "Wise one says."

Students should obey immediately each command preceded by "Wise one says," but must be careful not to obey any commands without it.

Each student who obeys a command that doesn't include "Wise one says" or who doesn't immediately obey a command with "Wise one says" must sit down and is out of the game.

Commands can be given faster and faster to make the game more challenging. The last person out wins and becomes the next leader.

This game demonstrates obeying the instructions of our parents, teachers and other appropriate authority figures ("wise ones") and not blindly following what friends and others tell us to do.