

Buddha's Cousin Devadatta

When the Buddha was young, he was a prince named Prince Siddhartha. He had a cousin named Devadatta, with whom he played as a child. Devadatta, however, was not as kind as Prince Siddhartha. Their difference in their character was evident when Devadatta one day shot a swan with his bow and arrow, and Prince Siddhartha ran to it quickly and saved its life, but Devadatta got angry, insisting the swan belonged to him as a hunting trophy.

Devadatta's tendency to harm others was evident in many past lives as told by the Buddha, now recorded in the Jataka Tales. Indeed, Devadatta in many past lives, including those as animals, tried to harm or kill the Bodhisattva, as the Buddha was known in his former lives.

Nevertheless, Devadatta, along with other family members, was ordained as a monk by the Buddha. He excelled in attaining supernatural powers.

Many years later, one day when the Buddha was 72 years old, Devadatta was alone, thinking, "Who is there whose confidence I can win over and thereby acquire much gain, honor and renown?" Then he thought, "There is Prince Ajatasattu, who is young with a glorious future. Suppose I win over his confidence? Much gain, honor and renown will accrue to me if I do so."

So, Devadatta packed his bed away, took his bowl and set out for the city of Rajagaha. He arrived after some time and, with his supernatural powers, changed his form into a youth with a belt of live snakes. In that strange guise he appeared before Prince Ajatasattu, who then felt fearful, anxious, suspicious and worried.

Devadatta asked, "Are you afraid of me, prince?"

The prince replied, "Yes, I am afraid. Who are you?"

"I am Devadatta," was the response.

The prince said, "If you are Devadatta, lord, then please show yourself in your own form."

Devadatta then resumed his ordinary form, standing before the prince in his patched outer cloak and monks' robes, with his bowl.

Prince Ajatasattu felt confidence in Devadatta because of his supernatural powers. He then served Devadatta morning and evening, with many horse-drawn carriages full of wonderful food. Devadatta became addicted to the gain, honor and fame he received due to Prince Ajatasattu's devotion, and ambition obsessed his mind. The wish arose in him, "I will rule the Buddha's Sangha of bhikkhus [monks]." At that moment, his supernatural powers vanished.

Sometime later, the Buddha traveled to Rajagaha, and when he arrived, a group of his student monks told him,

“Lord, Prince Ajatasattu goes to serve Devadatta each morning and evening with so many carriages and gifts of food.”

The Buddha responded, “Bhikkhus, do not begrudge Devadatta his gain, honor and renown. Just as, if one were to break a gall bladder under a fierce dog’s nose, he would get much fiercer, so too, as long as Prince Ajatasattu keeps waiting on Devadatta as he is doing, so long may wholesome states be expected to diminish and not increase in Devadatta. Just as a plantain bears its fruit for its own destruction and its own undoing, so too, Devadatta’s gain, honor and renown have arisen for his self-destruction and his own undoing.”

One day, the Buddha was teaching the Dharma, surrounded by a huge gathering including the king. Devadatta got up from his seat, and arranging his upper robe on one shoulder, he raised his hands, palms together toward the Buddha, and addressed him according to the custom as “Blessed One,” saying,

“Lord, the Blessed One is now old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life and come to the last stage. Let the Blessed One now rest. Let him dwell in bliss in the present life. Let him hand over the Sangha of bhikkhus to me. I will govern the Sangha of bhikkhus.”

The Buddha replied, “Enough, Devadatta. Do not aspire to govern the Sangha of bhikkhus.”

A second time Devadatta made the same proposal and received the same answer. When he made the proposal for the third time, the Buddha said,

“I would not hand over the Sangha of bhikkhus even to Sariputta and Moggallana. How should I do so to such a wastrel, a clot of spittle, as you?”

Then Devadatta thought, “Before the public, including the king, the Buddha has disgraced me with the words ‘clot of spittle’ and praised Sariputta and Moggallana.” He was angry and indignant. He showed the customary respect to the Buddha and departed.

The Buddha instructed the monks to publicly denounce Devadatta and say, “Formerly Devadatta had one nature; now he has another. Whatever Devadatta may do by body or speech neither the Blessed One nor the Dharma nor the Sangha should be held as having part in it; only Devadatta himself is to be held responsible for it.”

When Sariputta along with a group of monks went into the city, he denounced Devadatta as instructed by the Buddha.

There were some people without faith and confidence in the Dharma, who were unwise and indiscreet, who said, “These monks, sons of the Sakyans, are jealous of Devadatta’s gain, honor and renown.”

But the people who had faith and confidence in the Dharma, those people who were wise and discreet, said, "This can be no ordinary matter for the Blessed One to have had Devadatta denounced in Rajagaha."

Devadatta went to Prince Ajatasattu and said to him, "Formerly men had long lives, now they have short lives. Maybe you will die while still only a prince, so why do you not kill your father and become king? And I shall kill the Blessed One and become the Buddha."

Prince Ajatasattu thought, "The Lord Devadatta is mighty and powerful; he should know."

So, he fastened a dagger on his thigh, and then in broad daylight, fearful, anxious, suspicious and worried, he tried to slip into the inner palace. The king's officers at the entry to the inner palace arrested him and searched him. Finding the dagger, they questioned him about it, and he admitted he wanted to kill his father. They asked who prompted him to do this, and he said it was Devadatta. They brought Prince Ajatasattu to his father, King Bimbisara, and told him what happened.

The king asked his son, "Why do you want to kill me, prince?"

The prince answered, "I want the kingdom, sire."

The king said, "If you want the kingdom, prince, the kingdom is yours," and then turned the kingdom over to his son to rule.

Devadatta went to the prince and said to him, "Great king, send some men to take the monk Gotama's life," referring to the Buddha.

So, Prince Ajatasattu gave orders to some men to follow Devadatta's instructions, and Devadatta told them a plan to take the Buddha's life without being caught. The men started to carry out the plan, but when the one who was supposed to kill the Buddha got near him, he became frightened, prostrated at his feet, confessed and begged forgiveness. The Buddha gave him a Dharma teaching, and the man became a follower of the Buddha. The other men, wondering what happened to the first man, approached the Buddha and then also became his followers. When the first man returned to Devadatta, he said,

"I have not taken the Blessed One's life, Lord. The Blessed One is mighty and powerful."

Devadatta responded, "Enough, friend, do not take the monk Gotama's life. I will take the monk Gotama's life myself."

At that time, the Buddha was walking up and down in the shade of the Vulture Peak Rock. Devadatta climbed the rock and hurled down a huge stone, thinking, "I shall take the monk Gotama's life with this."

But two spurs of rock that came together below caught the rock, leaving a splinter of it to fall and severely injure the Buddha's foot. It was extremely painful.

The Buddha looked up and said to Devadatta, "Misguided man, you have made much demerit; for with evil intent, with intent to do murder, you have drawn the blood of a Perfect One."

The Buddha later told the monks that Devadatta's act will have an immediate effect on his rebirth.

Some time later, Devadatta went to the elephant stables in Rajagaha, where there was a savage elephant, a man-killing elephant called Nalagiri. Devadatta persuaded the elephant handlers to comply with his wishes by saying,

"We are known to the king and influential. We can get those in low places promoted, and we can get food and wages increased. So, when the monk Gotama comes down this road, let the elephant Nalagiri loose on the road."

The elephant handlers agreed. The next morning, the Buddha, along with some monks, went into Rajagaha to receive food. As the Buddha started walking down that road, the elephant handlers saw him and turned the elephant Nalagiri loose on the road. The elephant, seeing the Buddha coming in the distance, raised his trunk, ears and tail and charged toward him.

The monks saw the elephant charging, and warned and begged the Buddha to turn back, that the man-killing savage elephant is loose on the road.

The Buddha replied to them, "Come, bhikkhus, do not be afraid. It is impossible, it cannot happen, that anyone can take a Perfect One's life by violence. When Perfect Ones attain final nirvana, it is not through violence on the part of another."

The Buddha encompassed the elephant with thoughts of lovingkindness. The elephant lowered his trunk, and he went up to the Buddha and stood before him. The Buddha stroked the elephant's forehead with his hand and spoke to him. The elephant took the dust of the Buddha's feet with his trunk, sprinkled it on his head and went back to the elephant stables and stood in his own place.

When the people saw this, and heard about Devadatta's involvement, the gain and honor of Devadatta shrank away while the Buddha's gain and honor grew greater.

Some time later, Devadatta went to some other monks and said, "Come, friends, let us create a schism and a breach of concord in the monk Gotama's Sangha."

One of the monks, Kokālika, said, "The monk Gotama is mighty and powerful, friend. How can we do this?"

Devadatta proposed that they demand five rules: (1) that monks be forest-dwellers for life and any who go to live in a village be censured, (2) that they eat begged-for alms-food for life and any who accept an invitation be censured, (3) that they be refuse-rag wearers for life and any who wear a robe given by householders be censured, (4) that they be tree-root dwellers for life and any who dwell in buildings be censured, and (5) that they not eat fish or meat for life and any who do so be censured. He said that the monk Gotama will never grant these rules, so they can inform people about the five rules, and that will create a schism and breach of concord, because people admire self-denial.

Then Devadatta and his friends went to the Buddha, and after showing the customary respect, Devadatta said, "Lord, the Blessed One has in many ways commended one of few wishes, who is contented, devoted to effacement, scrupulous and amiable, given to diminution (of attachment) and energetic. Now, here are five points that are conducive to these things." And he enumerated the five proposed rules.

The Buddha responded, "Enough, Devadatta. Let him who wishes be a forest-dweller; let him who wishes dwell in a village. Let him who wishes be an eater of begged-for almsfood; let him who wishes accept invitations. Let him who wishes be a refuse-rag wearer; let him who wishes wear a robe given by householders. Living at the root of a tree is allowed by me for eight months of the year, but not during the rains. I have allowed fish and meat that is pure in the three aspects—when it is not seen or heard or suspected to have been killed for one personally."

Devadatta was happy that his plan worked, and after showing the customary respect, he left. He went into the city and proceeded to inform people about the five rules, and that the Buddha had not granted them, but that he and his followers would undertake to live by them. The unwise people lacking faith thought that Devadatta and his followers were scrupulous in effacement and that the Buddha lives in luxury, thinking of luxury. The wise people were annoyed, and protested that Devadatta was aiming at creating a schism and breach of concord in the Sangha.

The Buddha, hearing about it, then asked him, "Devadatta, is it true, as it seems, that you are aiming at creating a schism and a breach of concord in the Sangha?"

Devadatta admitted, "It is true, Lord."

The Buddha said, "Enough, Devadatta. Do not try to create a schism and a breach of concord in the Sangha. He who breaks the Sangha's concord reaps misery lasting the rest of the age; he ripens out in hell for the rest of the age. But he who reunites the Sangha already split up reaps the highest reward of merit and enjoys heaven for the rest of the age. Enough, Devadatta, do not try to create a schism in the Sangha; a schism in the Sangha is a grave thing."

In the morning, when Venerable Ananda went into Rajagraha to receive food, Devadatta saw him and told him that he would carry out acts of the Sangha apart from the Buddha and the

Sangha of monks. When Ananda told the Buddha about it, the Buddha, knowing the meaning of this, said,

Good can be easily done by the good;
Good is not easily done by the bad.
Evil is easily done by the bad;
Noble ones cannot do evil deeds.

Later, Devadatta held an election, announcing that the Buddha refused to accept the five rules, but that he would undertake to live by the five rules, and that anyone who is in favor of these five rules should take a voting ticket. At that time there were five hundred monks who were newly ordained and with no discretion of their own, and they took the voting tickets. Devadatta then left with those five hundred monks to another city, called Gayasisa.

Sariputta and Moggallana went to the Buddha and told him, "Lord, Devadatta has created a schism in the Sangha and has set out for Gayasisa with five hundred monks."

The Buddha responded, "Do you not both feel pity for those new monks? Go, before they come to ruin."

Sariputta and Moggallana left for Gayasisa. As they arrived, they saw that Devadatta was sitting, teaching the Dharma surrounded by a large assembly. As he saw Sariputta and Moggallana coming in the distance, he told the monks around him,

"See, bhikkhus, the Dharma is well proclaimed by me. Even the monk Gotama's chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, come to me and come over to my teaching."

Kokalika warned Devadatta, "Friend Devadatta, do not trust them. They are in the grip of evil wishes."

Devadatta responded, "Enough, friend; they are welcome since they have come over to my teaching."

Offering Sariputta one half of his seat, Devadatta said, "Come, friend Sariputta, sit here."

Sariputta declined his offer, and he and Moggallana took a seat on the side. Then Devadatta, after his Dharma discourse to the monks, spoke in a way just like the Buddha, as follows:

"Friend Sariputta, the Sangha of bhikkhus is still free from fatigue and drowsiness. Perhaps a talk on the Dharma may occur to you. My back is paining me, so I will rest it."

Sariputta agreed. Then Devadatta, in a manner just like the Buddha, laid out his outer robe and lay down on his right side in the lion's sleeping pose, one foot overlapping the other. He was tired, and dropped off to sleep, forgetful and not fully aware.

Sariputta advised and admonished the monks with a talk on the Dharma using his power of reading minds. Next, Moggallana advised and admonished the monks with a talk on the Dharma using his supernormal power, until the spotless, pure vision of the Dharma arose in them: all that is subject to arising is subject to cessation. Then Sariputta said to the monks,

“Bhikkhus, we are going back to the Blessed One. Whoever upholds the Blessed One’s Dharma, come with us.”

And Sariputta and Moggallana took the five hundred monks with them back to where the Buddha was staying.

Kokalika roused Devadatta, “Friend Devadatta, get up! The bhikkhus have been led away by Sariputta and Moggallana! Did I not tell you not to trust them because they have evil wishes and are in the grip of evil wishes?”

At that moment, Devadatta was so upset that hot blood gushed from his mouth. Sariputta and Moggallana went to the Buddha, who asked them how Devadatta acted. They told him that Devadatta acted exactly as the Buddha acted when, after instructing the monks, he asks Sariputta to teach. The Buddha replied with a story about elephants who would go into a pond and pull up lotus stalks, wash them until they were free of mud, and then eat them. This was good for their looks and their health. The young calves, which had not been instructed by the older elephants, also went into the pond and pulled up lotus stalks but ate them without cleaning off the mud, which caused them to become sick, suffer, and die. Then he said that similarly, Devadatta will die miserably through imitating him.

The Buddha said further, “Bhikkhus, Devadatta is overcome and his mind is obsessed by eight evil things, for which he will inevitably go to the states of privation, to hell, for the duration of the age. What are the eight? They are gain, lack of gain, fame, lack of fame, honor, lack of honor, evil wishes, and evil friends.” He added such fate results from Devadatta stopping halfway on the path to liberation with the attainment of the mere earthly distinction of supernormal powers.

King Ajatasattu sent his armies into the kingdom of his uncle, King Pasenadi, and defeated him. Later, King Pasenadi battled against King Ajatasattu and captured him alive. When the monks heard about it while receiving food in the city, they told the Buddha, who said:

A man may plunder as he will.

When others plunder in return, he, plundered, plunders them again.

The fool believes he is in luck as long as evil does not ripen; but when it does, the fool fares ill.

The slayer gets himself a slayer, the victor finds a conqueror, the abuser gets himself abused,
The persecutor gets persecuted;

The wheel of deeds turns round again and makes the plundered plunderers.

Dharma Discussion - Horrible People:

The Buddha knew that Devadatta's addiction to gifts and admiration from Prince Ajatasattu would make his good qualities diminish, and that it arose for his self-destruction and his own undoing. Nevertheless, the Buddha didn't interfere or try to save Devadatta. He even provoked Devadatta's anger, hastening him along the path to self-destruction, by calling him a wastrel and clot of spittle.

Apparently, as the Buddha said that Devadatta "had one nature, now he has another," Devadatta's training as a monk encouraged his good qualities, but his negative qualities prevailed and overcame the good qualities. The Buddha also explained why this is so: because evil is easily done by a bad person, and it is not easy for them to do good. The Buddha pointed out the negative qualities Devadatta had: being obsessed with gaining wealth and power, fame or popularity, being honored and admired, and evil desires. Devadatta couldn't stand not having wealth, power, fame and admiration. In addition, his negative qualities of associating with evil friends and gaining supernormal powers without pursuing liberation led to his downfall.

Devadatta's negative qualities and behaviors correspond to at least one if not all of the "dark triad" of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. He craved power, refused to take "no" for an answer from the Buddha, selfishly manipulated and exploited others, and seemingly had no concern for morality and no remorse, continuing in his murderous behavior even after having learned the Dharma.

Characteristics of each of the three in the dark triad include selfishness, arrogance, craving power, lacking empathy and remorse, using others for personal gain, aggressiveness, cruelty, callousness, bullying, belittling, gaslighting, and not taking "no" for an answer.

Additional traits particular to narcissism include egoism, hypersensitivity to criticism, and demanding attention, admiration, and special favors from others.

Many people, including children, have some narcissistic characteristics, but adults who consistently have many of them are commonly called narcissists.

Additional traits particularly evident of Machiavellianism are manipulating and exploiting others; ruthless lack of morality; craving status and prestige; and being cunning, two-faced and deceitful.

Traits typical of psychopathy are destructiveness, impulsivity, harming or killing with no emotion, and being easily angered.

Throughout history and all over the world, people have existed with dark personalities—with narcissistic, Machiavellian, and/or psychopathic traits.

But in modern times, it seems there are more such people than ever before.

We encounter them at work, in school, as neighbors, in our clubs, groups and organizations, and as members of our family. Because they crave power, they often seek positions of authority and leadership, so we might encounter them in many different contexts.

We might think of such people as evil, toxic, demonic, or, as the Buddha referred to them, as “the bad.” People with dark personalities have severely afflicted emotions, their mind encased in thick layers of delusion. They may be very intelligent, talented and knowledgeable, but they have succumbed to negative emotions and delusion which obscure their minds from the purity that the Buddha teaches us to awaken to.

When we meet such people, they can be very charming because they’re trying to get what they want from us, such as admiration, servitude, trust, or information. This charm is like a mask, hiding their personality.

When we experience their dark side, then it’s extremely distressing to have to deal with them. They create toxic relationships and unstable environments. When they are our manager or colleague, we might feel that our job is threatened; when they are a political leader, we feel our community or country is in danger; when they are a family member, we feel our family is torn apart.

Our feelings of anxiety, fear, distrust, frustration and helplessness reduce our self-esteem and confidence and affect our work, personal and family life.

Emotions of anger, hatred, ill will or vengeance arise again and again.

Harboring these emotions wastes our energy and compromises our physical and mental health. As we are repeatedly offended by their behavior, we might desperately try to change them or control them.

We must understand that we cannot heal, change or control them.

As extremely powerful and loving as the Buddha was, he couldn’t change or cure Devadatta.

Although he ordained Devadatta, and trained him to be disciplined and practice the Dharma to purify the mind, Devadatta’s afflicted emotions and delusions were too strong.

So, the Buddha let Devadatta pursue the path of self-destruction.

Devadatta’s ego was expanded like a balloon by the admiration of Prince Ajatasattu and the 500 new monks. Once it was so fully expanded, then it could be sharply and painfully deflated. Such ego can be deflated when those things to which they’re most attached (for example, power, wealth, fame) is destroyed.

But dark personalities fight the destruction and shame with extreme rage and revenge, so it takes many lifetimes for the ego to be deflated and broken, again and again, before they understand its futility.

As the Buddha taught, “A man may plunder as he will. When others plunder in return, he, plundered, plunders them again. The fool believes he is in luck as long as evil does not ripen; but when it does, the fool fares ill...The wheel of deeds turns round again and makes the plundered plunderers.”

As we see with Devadatta, confronting, insulting or challenging the ego of a dark personality enrages them, and this rage can be extremely destructive or violent.

Even if you doubt that they would react with violence if you point out their manipulative behavior or threaten them with consequences, they may fight viciously to save their self-image, as they cannot stand to be shamed.

So, understanding that we cannot change or control such a person, we must find ways to protect ourselves from being dragged down by them. How do we do that?

We must make efforts to protect our own physical and mental well-being.

This includes staying away from the person with a dark personality, even if we must make sacrifices to do so.

If we cannot physically separate ourselves from them permanently, then at least avoid them to the extent we can.

The Buddha taught us to avoid people who are negative influences: “If you cannot find a wise friend who leads a virtuous life, then like a king who leaves a conquered kingdom or like a lone elephant in the forest, you should go your way alone.” Dhammapada 329. “Not to follow or associate with the ignorant,...this is the best way.” Mahamangala Sutta.

Protecting our physical and mental well-being includes seeking support from family, friends, colleagues and perhaps therapy.

It’s important to meditate at least a few minutes daily and practice mindfulness intermittently during the day to enhance our mental well-being and ability to cope with adversities.

Meditation should include sending lovingkindness to, and sharing our merits with, all beings.

We might question whether we should send lovingkindness to dark personalities, the people who oppress us.

Yes, we should, as it helps to diminish our stressful feelings—anger, hatred, ill will, vengeance.

We first meditate on expanding our lovingkindness to all sentient beings.

Then, imagine all the millions of people in the world suffering from oppression by dark personalities, and with compassion, wish them healing, peace and happiness.

Then bring to mind all people with dark personalities, and reflect on the fact that they are deeply suffering, full of stress from their afflicted emotions, and will suffer more from the karmic effects of their actions. They are stuck in their delusion and ignorance. Remember the Buddha’s teaching, “The fool believes he is in luck as long as evil does not ripen; but when it does, the fool fares ill. The slayer gets himself a slayer, the victor finds a conqueror, the abuser gets himself abused; the persecutor gets persecuted.”

Let compassion for them arise in your heart.

Finally, wish that they swiftly find the Dharmic path to healing, peace and happiness, no longer harming others.

This practice may seem superficial at first, but the more we meditate and practice compassion generally, the more genuine and deep our practice becomes.

So, we practice lovingkindness and compassion for them from a distance.

But, might it weaken us, making us more likely to tolerate or allow manipulation and abuse?

No, because we improve our self-esteem and confidence from our Buddhist practice, and that gives us more strength to resist abuse.

In addition, we increase our awareness of others’ intent or deceit when we practice mindfulness.

Also our mind is clearer—better able to discern, plan, speak and decide wisely—when it isn’t clouded by anger, hatred or vengeance.

If we're overly attached to getting attention, admiration, status, prestige, promotion, wealth or other worldly things, then we more easily fall victim to manipulations of a person with a dark personality who might appear to provide such things. Our Buddhist practice helps us reduce such attachments and find joy and fulfillment in more wholesome activities, reducing our vulnerability to dark personalities.

What can we do when we must interact with a person with a dark personality?

It's best to minimize conversation, maintaining a calm, polite demeanor while conforming to basic social norms: greeting, neutral small-talk, necessary business, appropriate well-wishes. The goal is to avoid getting caught in their orbit as either their "supply" (source of their pleasure) or their enemy.

We can set unobtrusive boundaries to protect ourselves and reduce conflicts with the person. If the person violates the boundaries, we should be clear about what's acceptable and not, and enforce the boundaries consistently while we avoid showing emotion.

We can strengthen our confidence and positive energy by mentally chanting whatever mantra or appellation of the Buddha appeals the most to us, whenever we can remember to do so.