

Dharma Talk 12/12/2021 The Conditions of a Nation's Welfare

Dear friends, 2021--sometimes it felt so long and now I do not know where it went. 2022 ... I will make some predictions. Global warming will not disappear. Political upset will not disappear. Covid will not disappear. Of course, as individuals, we can swim against these streams and like salmons, we may be able to make it upriver for a while, for a distance. And our effort can take us to a different place but still, we don't change the direction of the river, we don't make water run uphill. Yet, I want us not to become discouraged and do the easy thing, I am asking all of us to continue practicing. Not to put on a band-aid and to fix something but simply because this is who we are. The other point is that the question is not about swimming with or against the stream or drifting along, it is about taking the appropriate action at the right time, seeing beyond our conditioning and habit patterns.

Now, the end of the year 2021 is approaching quickly, one more Zen Alive meeting this year next Sunday. Joden Bob Rose will be the speaker. I look forward to his talk because usually he engages our senses of tasting and smelling to spread the dharma. He has been our tenzo for more than 5 years now and we are all very grateful to Bob and his generous nature.

Usually, Red Cedar has a great celebration to ring out the old year and ring in the new with 108 strikes of our big rin gong bell. And we light a fire and send our innermost thoughts and wishes and regrets to the heavens as smoke. This year, it will be quiet – we are taking a break for the last week in December. Our first community event will be Zen Alive on January 2. And Zen Alive will remain online in 2022, mostly due to the number of guest speakers who are not local.

And now a heads up for our local folks: Our in-person program will change in two respects. Number 1: We will move from the Shambhala Center on Meridian to the Unitarian Church on Ellsworth. Number 2: We will shift our evening practice from Wednesday to Thursday. Last not least, our 2022 practice period will begin in January. Seiu Hannah Sullivan will serve as Shuso, the head student, and she will talk about the Diamond Sutra. Her teacher, Sokaku Kathie Fisher, will be here for the opening and closing events of the practice period. If you wish to participate, please sign up online. Also, if you are interested, you can sign up for a practice partner.

I am so happy that we are meeting in person again. I was touched by the intimacy at the Rohatsu sesshin. To actually sit with living beings without a screen in-between. Rohatsu celebrates the great awakening, the transformation of Siddharta Gautama

into the Buddha. This is the core of the story:

Finally Siddhartha came to a quiet place near the river and sat down under a huge tree. He settled down with a simple yet unshakable vow to stay still until he realized the truth. Because of that diamond-sharp, solid, and clear commitment, the place he did zazen is called the indestructible seat. It's the bodhi seat, the seat of enlightenment, the same seat you're sitting on, that anyone doing zazen sits on. When the morning star appeared, he was suddenly enlightened and spoke the words, "I and all sentient beings on earth, together, attain enlightenment at the same time."

That is of course our austere Zen version. According to the Theravadan tradition, he uttered the following words:

*Through the round of many births I roamed
without reward,
without rest,
seeking the house-builder.
Painful is birth
again & again.*

*House-builder, you are seen!
You will not build a house again.
All your rafters broken,
the ridge pole destroyed,
gone to the Unformed, the mind
has come to the end of craving.*

But then, looking ahead at 2022, a different passage from the Pali canon came up for me and it refused to be put aside: the conditions of the nation's welfare. The internet has its blessings and curses. Perhaps we have become so comfortable with our central heating and air conditioning, with grocery stores and SUVs, that the current social instability and the decline of democracy feel like personal attacks. Sometimes it is hard to realize that in the middle of this mess our lives are not bad at all. And at the same time I feel that social engagement is essential to create change because it appears that recurring social unrest is built into humanity. It was like this when Shunryu Suzuki came to America. It happened in Dogen's time. It happened in China and Japan to our Buddhist ancestors. And it happened in the Buddha's time that war between the Vajjis and the kingdom of Magadha was brewing

Please have patience with me because I found some information on Wikipedia about the Buddha's home country, Maghada while doing a bit of background research for my dharma talk. And I find this totally fascinating. So, the culture of Magadha was in fundamental ways different from the kingdoms of the Indo-Aryans and were considered a hostile tribe, living on the borders of Vedic India. There is an argument for a cultural area termed "Greater Magadha", defined as roughly the geographical area in which the Buddha and Mahavira lived and taught. Suggestive of this distinction, in some Vedic and post-Vedic rituals, a "Magadha man" represents the canonical non-Vedic "Barbarian", the Magadhan standing in for the presence of any and all non-Vedic peoples or the ritually impure.

Today, I want to do something different. I will read the beginning of the Mahaparinibbana Sutta: Last Days of the Buddha. The Buddha talks about the strength and welfare of a nation. And I hope that this reading will inspire a conversation. This is the only writing about politics I have found in the Pali canon.

But first, a bit of background on the actors in this scene. We are, of course familiar with the Buddha and Ananda, who both came from the kingdom of Maghada. Ajatasattu is the current king of Maghada. Footnote--rumor has it that he murdered his father Bimbisara to gain the throne and also, that he in turn was murdered by his own son. Vassakara is a Brahman and chief minister of Ajatasattu. The Vajji confederacy and the kingdom of Maghada are neighbors.

All right, the stage is set. Vassakara, Ajatasutta's chief minister, approaches the Buddha.

He approached the Blessed One on foot. After exchanging courteous greetings with the Blessed One, together with many pleasant words, he sat down at one side and addressed the Blessed One thus: "Venerable Gotama, Ajatasattu, the king of Magadha, pays homage at the feet of the Venerable Gotama and wishes him good health, strength, ease, vigour, and comfort. He desires to wage war against the Vajjis, and he has spoken in this fashion: 'These Vajjis, powerful and glorious as they are, I shall annihilate them, I shall make them perish, I shall utterly destroy them.'"

You may wonder why the Buddha did not tell Vassakara that he was a peace bringer, that war is bad and that a solution should be found. Perhaps the world honored one accepted that war was the habit. Maybe he knew that war will happen no matter

what he says. But the Buddha responded in a different fashion.

At that time the Venerable Ananda was standing behind the Blessed One, fanning him, and the Blessed One addressed the Venerable Ananda thus: "What have you heard, Ananda: do the Vajjis have frequent gatherings, and are their meetings well attended?"

"I have heard, Lord, that this is so."

"So long, Ananda, as this is the case, the growth of the Vajjis is to be expected, not their decline. What have you heard, Ananda: do the Vajjis assemble and disperse peacefully and attend to their affairs in concord?"

"I have heard, Lord, that they do."

"So long, Ananda, as this is the case, the growth of the Vajjis is to be expected, not their decline. What have you heard, Ananda: do the Vajjis neither enact new decrees nor abolish existing ones, but proceed in accordance with their ancient constitutions?"

"I have heard, Lord, that they do."

"So long, Ananda, as this is the case, the growth of the Vajjis is to be expected, not their decline. What have you heard, Ananda: do the Vajjis show respect, honor, esteem, and veneration towards their elders and think it worthwhile to listen to them?"

"I have heard, Lord, that they do."

"So long, Ananda, as this is the case, the growth of the Vajjis is to be expected, not their decline. What have you heard, Ananda: do the Vajjis refrain from abducting women and maidens of good families and from detaining them?"

"I have heard, Lord, that they refrain from doing so."

"So long, Ananda, as this is the case, the growth of the Vajjis is to be expected, not their decline. What have you heard, Ananda: do the Vajjis show respect, honor, esteem, and veneration towards their shrines, both those within the city and those outside it, and do not deprive them of the due offerings as given

and made to them formerly?"

"I have heard, Lord, that they do venerate their shrines, and that they do not deprive them of their offerings."

"So long, Ananda, as this is the case, the growth of the Vajjis is to be expected, not their decline. What have you heard, Ananda: do the Vajjis duly protect and guard the arahats, so that those who have not come to the realm yet might do so, and those who have already come might live there in peace?"

"I have heard, Lord, that they do."

"So long, Ananda, as this is the case, the growth of the Vajjis is to be expected, not their decline."

And the Blessed One addressed the brahman Vassakara in these words: "So long, brahman, as these seven conditions leading to (a nation's) welfare endure among the Vajjis, and the Vajjis are known for it, their growth is to be expected, not their decline." Thereupon the brahman Vassakara spoke thus to the Blessed One: "No harm, indeed, can be done to the Vajjis in battle by Magadha's king, Ajatasattu, except through treachery or discord. Well, then, Venerable Gotama, we will take our leave, for we have much to perform, much work to do."

"Do as now seems fit to you, brahman." And the brahman Vassakara, the chief minister of Magadha, approving of the Blessed One's words and delighted by them, rose from his seat and departed.

Interestingly, both Buddhist and Jain traditions recall this war though the story lines are quite different. You can take your pick between the output of a shared diamond mine and personal greed of the Maghada royal household. And how did the kingdom of Maghada win? Ajatasattu sent his chief minister Vassakara to infiltrate the Vajji confederacy. Probably he was not alone. Political unrest, probably lies and sabotage, destruction of the altars, destruction of civil society. And within three years he had sown enough discord that the seven conditions leading to (a nation's) welfare and to the unity of the Vajjis were destroyed.

***Vajjis have frequent gatherings, and their meetings are well attended
Vajjis assemble and disperse peacefully and attend to their affairs in concord***

Vajjis neither enact new decrees nor abolish existing ones, but proceed in accordance with their ancient constitutions

Vajjis show respect, honor, esteem, and veneration towards their elders and think it worthwhile to listen to them

Vajjis refrain from abducting women and maidens of good families and from detaining them

Vajjis show respect, honor, esteem, and veneration towards their shrines

Vajjis duly protect and guard the arahats