

## **The Story of King Ajatasattu's Search for Happiness**

*Theme: The value of a life of simplicity, contentment and meditation*

This is what we have been told. Once, a long time ago, there was a great king. His name was Ajatasattu and he ruled over the greatest kingdom in the whole of Northern India. He had thousands of servants and there were many rich people in his kingdom, and they had to pay lots of taxes to the king. He had officials and ministers who all obeyed him and he had 500 wives, who also all obeyed him. However, King Ajatasattu had a big problem. He had become the king by killing his father. So he was afraid that his own son, whom he loved very dearly, might turn out to be just as selfish and cruel as he was – and might kill him to gain power, just as he himself had killed his own father. So although he had enormous riches and power, what he did not have was peace of mind or happiness.

Now King Ajatasattu knew that many holy men thought that peace of mind and happiness come from leading a simple life of meditation, not worrying about riches and power. But he did not see how he could be happy without having riches and power. So he consulted with the holy men in his kingdom to see if they could give him advice on how leading a simple life could possibly help him to gain happiness. But none of them was any help.

Then one of his advisers, Jivaka, said, 'What about consulting with the Buddha? He is supposed to be a very wise holy man and he is living in the forest just outside the town. He has more than a thousand monks with him, and *they* all think his teachings are wonderfully helpful, so maybe he can give you an answer.'

So King Ajatasattu decided to go and visit the Buddha. Of course he couldn't go anywhere just on his own, because he always needed reminders of how rich and powerful he was. So he set out with a great procession of all his royal ministers and with 500 elephants, each one carrying one of his 500 wives.

Now, when he reached the place where the Buddha was, surrounded by his thousand monks, the first thing that struck him was that it was all totally QUIET. This made the king feel nervous. He was always afraid that someone might be plotting to take away his power and his wealth, and so the first thought that popped into his head was that maybe this quiet meant that Jivaka, his minister, might be in league with his son and might be leading him into a trap. Perhaps all these people were lying in wait to carry out a surprise attack and kill him. That's always the problem if you feel guilty – you are always afraid.

But Jivaka said, 'Don't be afraid: there's the Buddha over there; just go up to him and ask your question.'

So Ajatasattu left his procession of royal ministers and 500 wives and elephants at the side of the clearing and went up to the Buddha. But the way he asked his question was interesting. The question he *thought* he wanted to ask was this: 'Look, all the citizens in my kingdom are doing useful work. My royal ministers help me make decisions, my soldiers defend the country, some people make baskets, others make cakes, others make beautiful pots, lovely garlands, there are barbers that cut your hair, bankers who look after your money, and so on. Everyone is doing something useful. But are you and your monks really doing anything useful? How does what you do, sitting and meditating, help to make people happier?' But what he *actually* said was: 'How can I make sure that *my son* gains the same peace of mind and tranquillity as all these monks?' Now, you know why he asked his question that way. Because, of course, what he was most afraid of was that his own son, whom he loved dearly, would kill him, Ajatasattu, to get all his riches and power, in the same way that he, Ajatasattu, had killed his own father for the same reason. That was his real problem: was there any way of escaping from all his anxiety and worry?

Now the Buddha knew all this, but he tactfully didn't mention it. So, very cleverly, he answered as follows. He started by reminding Ajatasattu that he already knew the answer to his own question about whether meditating and leading a simple life was 'useful'. The Buddha said, 'If one of your servants were to decide that he (or she) was going to stop working for you and, instead, go away to lead a *simple* life, be *contented* with what they already had, and spend time meditating quietly, what would you do? Would you send soldiers after them to capture them, bring them back and make them work for you again?' And King Ajatatsattu said, as the Buddha knew he would, 'No, I would wouldn't send soldiers after them to capture them and make them work for me again, I would bow down to them out of respect, and make sure that they were safe where they were, meditating and leading their simple life.'

'Right,' said the Buddha, 'So, if you, the king, would bow with respect to someone leading the simple life and meditating, that proves that you already believe in the value and importance of the simple life. So all I need to explain is how and why. The simple life, said the Buddha, involves a few basic rules:

1. Always act kindly towards other people, never do anything that is harmful to them.
2. Always act generously: never take what is not yours.
3. Always speak truthfully and kindly.

4. Be contented with what you have: don't rush around trying to be more successful than other people.

5. Don't get angry.

6. And, especially, spend some time just sitting, relaxing your mind and being aware of your body.

If you do these things, you will be surprised how different you feel. After a time you will just feel happy and calm and you will realise for yourself that everything is all right, that you don't need to be afraid of anything, because you already have everything that is important.'

King Ajatasattu was very moved by what the Buddha said, and he replied as follows:

'I can see now how what you teach is not only useful but actually it is more important than anything else. It feels as though everything in my life has up till now been upside down. But now you have turned everything the right way up. Before, I was in the dark, but now you have shone a lamp and I can see how wrong I have been.'

And he and his ministers and servants and 500 elephants and 500 wives went back to the royal palace.

### Questions

1. Consider the six rules that the Buddha gave to King Ajatasattu. Do you agree that following the them would help you to be happy?
2. Why did King Ajatasattu ask the Buddha why leading a simple life and meditating was of any use when he seemed to know the answer already?
3. Why did King Ajatasattu say that previously his ideas had been upside down, and now the Buddha had turned them the right way up?
4. Do you think that King Ajatasattu was able to change his life?

### *Dharma Issues:*

- *The value of a life of simplicity and meditation*
- *The relationship between what we already 'know' and what we need to learn*

*Based on The Samannaphala Sutta, in the Digha Nikaya, [The Long Discourses of the Buddha], Wisdom Publications, 1995, pp.91-109*