

2020-08-30 Social Justice Through a Buddhist Lens

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SPEAKERS

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So good day greetings. And for this Sunday morning talk, I would like to attempt to talk about social justice through a Buddhist lens. It seems that this social justice, justice, economic justice, Justice with the legal system is a huge issue in this country in the United States. And how is it that Buddhist teachings might relate to this and address this? Support us? Maybe in the struggle for social justice? People asked that question often. That's the question of me. And people who go back to look at the traditional Buddhist teachings, sometimes our little bit trouble to discover how difficult it is to find teachings that are directly related to what we might call social justice. And one of the reasons for that is that the words, terms social justice is only about 150 years old. So in English, so even in English writings before the year 1780 or so, it would you wouldn't find the terms. So you couldn't search for it. Same thing with Buddhist texts. However, there's a few things. One is that the word Dharma could easily mean justice. And that someone who stands on the Dharma was established and the Dharma is established in justice. But to say that doesn't say much what it means. And, and there's maybe a good reason why in the ancient texts, we don't find the Buddha talking about social justice and economic issues and legal issues in the way that we would like It find that addresses the issues of our, our society. And that is it's a very different society back then the Buddha lived in the bronze ages. It's a very ancient times and things were very different back there. And the primary source of governance in the time of the Buddha and the places where mostly he lived during his life, his life after he was awakened. Work where countries ruled by kings, some of them who are despots, the really, you know, absolute, you know, authority. And you get a sense of that, in this wonderfully terrible descriptions that are given in the text of the different ways that a king might kill someone, and some of them are quite gruesome and creative and all the different ways and and, you know, the king's word goes and if you oppose the king in any way, it's interesting Life perhaps. And so too for the Buddha or anyone back then to offer alternative party to the Kings party to offer an alternative protest to what the king is how

the king is governing probably wouldn't have gone over very well. So the Buddha instead of talking about these things directly, talked about them indirectly. And he told stories and stories that excuse me, stories that I think of, as fables. And but these some of these stories, if you unpack them, if you apply them to our situation, they do have some perspectives to give us and certainly get us a feeling or a sense of what the Buddhist approach the Buddhist direction, the Buddhist ways in which we would address these kinds of issues where they come from or what Maybe it would be. So the Buddha addressed these issues indirectly by telling stories. And I call them fables. But maybe in his time, he could tell these stories because he had a certain authority as a spiritual teacher. And the kings of the time, you know, Buddha wasn't talking about them directly. But they, they were presented as if these were true events that happen many, many years ago, I mean, millions of years ago. And in kind of a fable time, the story I'm going to tell you, begins at a time when human life was at 4000 years old, 85 84,000 years, and that, with the deterioration of the social conditions of the time, people's lifetimes decreased over the millennia, until finally they became just down to seven days. That's a lifetime of human being. And then They got better again.

So that's kind of you get a sense of a fable, maybe going from 84,000 years life's lifespan to much shorter. And it begins with the story of an account of King who travels across greater India, and to conquer it and unifies all of India. And that in becoming this, what's called a wheel turning monarch, he acquires a number of treasures. And one of the treasures that's symbolic of his power and governance is that of a wheel. And the wheel probably refers to the chariot wheel. But that was chariot that was used at war. And it was a kind of a new invention, especially in this kind of context of war, and was very effective. And so it was a symbol of power. What the Buddha did, and he and others I think was they took this symbol of have temporal power and transformed it into a symbol of Dharma power. And this story is part of that movement to kind of appropriate this symbol to take it away from this kind of violent origin and had had maybe to something is much more peaceful. And so this king acquired this, this treasure called a wheel. But it was kind of a mythic wheel or magical wheel because it was a wheel that was floating above the Capitol, just like a big wheel that indicated he had the power or something. And, but he knew it wasn't always going to be there hanging in there. And he told his ministers you tell me when that wheel disappears. And sure enough, one day the wheel disappeared. And they came to him and said, it's, you know, it's disappeared. And he said to his ministers of what should I do now and then ministers said, Well, now, you are supposed to become a wheel turning monarch, meaning you are supposed to become someone who is who embodies the qualities of the Dharma, and Dharma turning monarch. And in the end, he said, Well, how do I do that? And he says, You live by Justice, you govern by Justice. You protect people through justice. And you protect everyone. You protect your family, the townspeople, the people in the countryside, the whole realm. It's your job to protect and guard them and support them in their lives. And then a very interesting and this is where it starts getting a little bit more poignant for us is you want to protect them from crime Let there let there be no crime prevail in your kingdom and, and to those in need, give property. So this is one of the key things advice that he was given his. His is don't let there be any crime but how do you not let there be crime, you support the people in need. You give them property so they can grow food

or do what they want to do. And this was seen that is one of the primary responsibilities for a king in this table. In addition, the minister said to the king, you should find the religious people then the monks, the ascetics, there renunciations who have become free of craving and clinging and you should frequently go to them for counsel and hear advice those who are peaceful and compassion so that's kind of the extent to which he was given teachings. And here we see the emphasis is on, I like to think I support the people in need, protect people and support the people in need. So he did that then things went really well for a long time. And some point he died and his, his child became the next monarch.

And it went on for several generations. And it followed the same pattern that when someone became a monarch, this wheel would appear in the sky, the wheel would disappear. And the person would get the advice to live in, in Dharma way to live, protecting people and supporting those who are needy. And then they came along a king who heard this advice, but he didn't follow it. He did not support it. people in need. And, and lo and behold the people who are poor, started, some people are poor started to starve and have a very poor impoverished life. And one of them in order to support his family stole, stole some food, which is, you know, if your family is starving, starving to death, stealing food, some some society and some law books even is not really considered stealing, because it's the higher need is to keep people alive. And so someone stole and he was arrested and brought to the king. And the king said, Is it true that you have stolen food? And the man said, Yes. And the king said, Why? Because I'm full. I'm poor, and I'm trying to feed my family. And the king said, okay, and that case, I'll offer you some property, so you can make a living for yourself and not have to be so poor. And the man said, Thank you. And that's how it happened. But then someone else stole something into a poor person. And the poor person, same thing happened and the king gave that person some property. And then the people, the country got a sense look at what happens if we steal the king gives us property. So they started stealing, and getting arrested, and they go in front of the king. And after a while, the king realized what was going on. And so this you can't continue. I can't keep doing this. I can't give property to everyone this way. So the next person who came in front of him was arrested for stealing here arranged for them for the person's head to be chopped off just to kill the person. Well, that created a very different conditions in the realm and the people who had started stealing, because they were poor. So Well, now that the king wants to keep We should get weapons for ourselves and defend ourselves. And but they didn't just use the weapons to defend themselves, they use the weapons to steal more and started killing other people. And the society started to unravel. And as it unraveled over long, millennia period of time, the lifespan of people decreased more and more. And, and then there started to be all kinds of other difficulties, that once you started killing people, they were lying already when they came to the king and they started lying to the king and the king catch people who were stealing. And he would say, are you stealing? They say no. And so line became prevalent, killing became prevalent. And then with things deteriorated, sexual misconduct became prevalent, prevalent. And, and then, not only line became prevalent, but a divisive speech and harsh speech became prevalent, and then people became included. singly, covetous, this covetous, wanting, holding, acquiring, keeping things for themselves.

And then they became increasingly hostile to each other. And they started having all kinds of crazy ideas and stories and opinions about all kinds of things. And, and it's just and then everyone had weapons. And people started fighting and warring and killing. And it says in the text that parents fought their children and children for foster parents and neighbors fought neighbors, and it just kind of things really unraveled. And their lifespans would decrease to just seven days. And so here we see the unraveling of a society because the ruler whose job is to is to care for people, especially to care For the poor, is allow is not caring for the poor and not caring for the poor and supporting them to come out of poverty, then in order to survive, they start a life of crime. But then the when when life of crime starts, then it's hard to get back on course. And, and eventually there's all this killing of people because they, they they steal the poor people steal so they're killed and harsh judgment harsh legal system that it makes the whole system situation worse they say that live by the sword and die by the sword live by hostility and hatred and hatred is what follows and what grows. And this story kind of conveys this idea of how they things just becoming worse and worse with the violence and the hatred and the animosity and the lack of care and lack of support that existing in society that time. And at some point, when things got the worst, some people escaped into the forest, deep into the forest that was inaccessible to other people. And for seven days they stayed in the forest meditating. And after seven days, they came out of the forest.

And I read it, it says, at the end of the seven days, they emerged from their hiding places, and rejoiced together of one accord, saying, good beings, I see that you are alive and then the thought will occur to those It is only because we became infatuated with evil ways, harmful ways that we suffered this loss of our families and relatives. So, let us now do good. Let us now do what is ethical. In the story, they talk about how things got so terrible in society so much violence and, and unethical activity, that they even forgot what the word ethics is. There was nothing that the word ethics disappeared from that, in that chaotic time. And so these people come together and this is a very important part of the story, that they go off into the forest. They come out and they come to a new conclusion that way didn't work. Let's now live a Dharma life adjust life and ethical life. Let's live for the good and supportive of each other. This idea of coming together in unity unifying and caring for each other, was radically different than the direction the society had gone, which was highly divisive and fragmented. And then these people started to live an ethical life. And as they did, so their lifespans over the generations got longer and longer and longer. Until finally, they got to be once again at 4000 years. And then the story goes on, and says that when they got to be that lifespan, and everything was good, there was a king who was living then the righteous King, the just King, at some point in his, in his reign, renounced the throne, handed his palace over to the monks and nuns renunciations to beggars to poor people. So they had a place to live and He went off to become a monastic himself and went off to practice and practice the Dharma to become awakened and attained the highest level of knowledge and, and liberation that's possible for a human being. And so, here we have the Buddhist saying yes to being a king is, you know one thing, but even better, is to really transform oneself. So what is most good inside of us gets liberated and freed. And what is the forces of of of harm the forces of greed, hate and

delusion are freed up and are liberated from us. So to become a just King, to live with justice in this story, is to make sure that people really make sure and really focus on the poor. And to take care of the poor. So the poor are not poor, to bring to elevate their situation, give opportunities for them, education to them, whatever it takes to pull them out of poverty. And we've seen repeatedly, the story that the Buddha's kind of represents in this mythic story is that when the poor are not cared for when there's no opportunities for them, and there's oppression and they're actually subjugated, and the opportunity to doors are closed for their possibilities to kind of come out of the poverty, that it's all too easy to succumb to fear, anger, hatred, frustration, crime, violence, addiction to drugs, alcohol, and then life begins to unravel. And it doesn't become so pretty how it looks. And then if we add in Just criminal systems to that, and put people in long sentences and limit their lives in dramatic ways to through the sentences they're given. It just makes the whole situation worse and their family, their neighborhoods, their situation keeps unraveling more and more. And, and so someone has to stop this. And in the, in the ancient text it's, it's the people who band together come together to start living an ethical life.

And then eventually that comes back these world turning monarchist government, these rulers who could realize again that that their job is to care for the poor and to protect everyone else. And that the care of the poor is really a foundation for what Buddhist social justice is based on. I think and terms of what we can see in the ancient texts. And so how do we care for the poor? How do we have a country that cares for the poor? And it's nice, I think I like to believe that when you live in a democracy, that in a certain kind of way, each of us is the monarch, each of us has a responsibility to step forward to support and make the democracy work. And it's not just a matter of a mythic King who's going to do it for us. But it's up for each of us. And that's the way the story ends. That is, the people came out of the forest, that they realized they had to become different. And the difference was to really be committed to an ethical life. To not kill, not steal, not engage in sexual misconduct not lie. Not to engage in divisive speech doctrine gays in harsh speech, not engaged in, in empty speech, pointless speech, to avoid being covetous, greedy, to avoid ill will hostility. And to have what the Buddha says called Buddhism is called the right view. And right view, one of the aspects of it is to really appreciate that everything we do has consequences. They have ethical consequences, that ripples from us and back to us. That how we behave is hugely important. And from a Buddhist point of view, there's no real transformation of society unless you live an ethical life, if that's what you want to adjust, society then to live in. And so I pray each of us for me and for everyone to have that as a foundation, and from that foundation, to be concerned about poverty in this country, and all of us to do what we can to make a difference, to support people, to help them to come out of poverty and learn take care of themselves. And I know good and successful way, allow everyone to have equal opportunities to find their way. So that is one of the teachings of Buddhism that we can tap into touch into for looking for Buddhism for something, some reference or some support for thinking about social justice. And an ad because it's kind of a myth or a fable. It can be adapted, it can be interpreted, I think, in many important and valuable ways. And perhaps there can be I'm not going to To put many Dharma talks, different talks of taking this fable and looking at it and applying and all kinds of different ways in our life. And so in

Buddhism, social justice is present social justice is presented to through stories. And there was a time in my life where I would have kind of diminished the value of these mythic fable kind of stories and their importance. But it seems that down through the centuries right up to today, that the people who move society the most are in religions that move society are often telling stories. And so we have to be very careful what stories we tell and to have stories available, that are stories of social justice, that hopefully can move society in the right direction. A reference point for all of us a common vocabulary and stories. That we can share and come to similar understanding.

So social justice is really one of the great calls of our time. And I hope that then giving this little talk that you will give more thought to issues of social, social justice and, and all our needs the need for all of us to address them. So thank you so much and wonderful to be here with you.