

# What Makes a Society Strong?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 21:49

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We spent the last three days looking at all these various viewpoints as to the virtues and wholesome attitudes that we need to build a different sort of society, or at least one that moves towards people rather than things. That's one way I would like to see it anyway.

Now, of course, these things have to be turned into policies. And that's the difficult thing, and how it manifests in our institutions. So there's a lovely passage here, which you find at the beginning of the *Parinibbāna* discourse, the Sutta number 16, which is the last days of the Buddha.

During those last times, I think the Buddha was a little preoccupied by what was happening, probably very concerned, worried about his order. He'd always had two kings who supported him. In fact, seemingly everybody supported him, all the different groups of people, ethnic groups, confederacies. But the two main ones were Bimbisāra, who was a king of Magadha, around Varanasi, in those days called Benares, which is right on the Ganges there. And further north was Pasenadi in Kosala.

Both of them died before him. Bimbisāra and then their sons weren't particularly supportive at all. In fact, Ajātasattu, who was the son of Bimbisāra, ganged up with the dastardly Devadatta to overcome the Buddha and Bimbisāra. Devadatta was unsuccessful. He sent a wild elephant on the border. He rode a boulder down the hill, which caught him on the toe, it seems, trying to kill him so that he could take over the order. He's got a very bad name in Theravāda Buddhism. But actually, I think what he was trying to do was take the order back to its original, hard, committed ways to the ascetic life. He felt it had gone soft, and he wanted to introduce new rules. One of them was vegetarianism, another was only one meal a day, only three robes, etc. The Buddha said that you can practice these as special practices, but he didn't institute them as rules. Well, this upset Devadatta very much, it seems, so he tried to kill him.

And he was in cahoots with this Ajātasattu, and Ajātasattu did actually seemingly murder his father. He locked him up in a hut in Rājagaha, which is present-day Rajgir. And if you go there, one side of the ring of hills is where the Buddha gave his talks at Vulture's Peak. And a lot of the Mahāyāna scriptures are given on that Vulture's Peak. And down below, within the circle of that, you can visit this hut where Bimbisāra was starved to death. It's very pleasant, is it?

Anyway, the big political movement of the time was away from these confederacies, which had a sort of democracy about them. It wasn't full suffrage or anything, it was more like the ruling class and the brahmins would vote to have a leader. His own father was the leader of the Sakyans up in the north along the present-day border of Nepal. One of there were still these confederacies but the movement was towards kingship.

And this eventually culminated, of course, in the great emperor Ashoka, third century, I think, second, you know, 200 and odd, who became emperor virtually of all India. But it had begun before the Buddha's time and there were established kingdoms, one of Kosala, Pasenadi, and one where he is now at Vulture's Peak by Bimbisāra.

Anyway, Ajātasattu, he's got plans, you see. So he said to his chief minister, the Brahmin Vasakāra, "Brahmin, go to the Blessed One, worship him with your head at his feet in my name, ask if he is free from sickness and disease, if he's living at ease, vigorously, comfortably, and then say, Lord, King Ajātasattu of Magadha wishes to attack the Vajjians. I will strike the Vajjians who are so powerful and strong, I will cut them off, destroy them, and I will bring them to ruin and destruction."

So this is what Vasakāra actually says to the Buddha. It's an odd thing to approach him with that clear statement of what the king wanted to do.

Now, Venerable Ānanda was standing behind the Lord fanning him. And he asked certain questions. So here I found the, this is in the long length discourses, which was translated by Maurice Walsh. But you get a slightly, I think, easier translation in that book that I'm looking at, *Social and Communal Harmony* by Bhikkhu Bodhi. So he's collected all this stuff around politics and stuff.

So this is what the Buddha says. He says there are seven principles of non-decline. As long as the Vajjis assemble often and hold frequent assemblies, only growth is to be expected of them and not decline. As long as the Vajjis assemble in harmony, adjourn in harmony and conduct their affairs and conduct the affairs of the Vajjis in harmony, only growth can be expected of them and not decline. As long as the Vajjis do not decree anything that has not been decreed or abolish anything that has already been decreed, but undertake to follow the ancient Vajji principles as they have been decreed, only growth is to be expected for them and not decline.

As long as the Vajjis honour, respect, esteem and venerate the Vajji elders and think they should be heeded, only growth can be expected for them and not decline. As long as the Vajjis do not abduct women and girls from their families and force them to live with them, only growth can be expected for them and not decline. So long as the Vajjis honour, respect, esteem and venerate their traditional shrines, both those within the city and those outside, and do not neglect the righteous oblations as given and done to them in the past, only growth can be expected for them and not decline. And as long as the Vajjis provide righteous protection, shelter and guard for Arahats, so that those Arahats who have not yet come may arrive, and those Arahats who have already come may dwell at ease there, only growth can be expected for them and not decline.

So these are the seven principles of non-decline. This is from a different part of the scriptures in the one about the Buddha's final days, he asks Ānanda, you see, and Ānanda says, that is so, that is so, the Vajjis do behave like this, they do behave like that.

So at this point, we'll come back to these in a minute, the Vasakāra, the Brahmin who's come to ask these questions of the Buddha, goes away saying, let's see if I can pick it up here. "Venerable Gautama," this is what Vasakāra says, having heard these seven principles. "If the Vajjians keep even one of these principles, they may be expected to prosper and not to decline, far less all seven. Certainly the Vajjians will never be conquered by King Ajātasattu by force, but only by means of propaganda and setting them against one another. And now, Venerable Gautama, may I depart. I am busy and have much to do."

The Buddha replies "Brahmin do as you think is fit" and according to the history, don't quite know where this comes from but it must be in the commentaries presumably, in the commentaries later on Vasakāra posed as a conspirator against his king and so he was denounced as a traitor and fled to Vesāli which was the capital of the Vajjis for asylum. Now the next three years were spent by him in artful dissemination of distrust and mutual suspicion among the members of the confederacy and when he judged the moment right he secretly informed king Ajātasattu and the rulers of Vesāli were now too disunited to defend their country, and Ajātasattu was soon able to round off a successful invasion with an extensive massacre of the population.

So that's what was happening at the time of the Buddha. If you look around the world today, I don't think there's been much improvement.

But let's go through these principles again and see if we can match them to anything of our present society. So the Vajjis assemble often and hold frequent assemblies. So we can look upon our parliaments and assemblies, local governments, I suppose, and we can probably expect to grow and not to decline. As long as the Vajjis assemble in harmony, adjourn in harmony and conduct affairs of the Vajjis in harmony, only growth can be expected of them and not decline. So there's not that much harmony around Europe and the West at the moment, not as harmonious as it used to be, but they're still assembling and nobody's picked up any arms yet. Although I have to say, I'm always reminded of the murder of Jo Cox there during the Brexit stuff, which of course is absolutely awful.

As long as the Vajjis do not decree anything that has not been decreed and abolish anything that has already been decreed, but undertake and follow the ancient Vajji principles as they have been decreed, only growth can be expected. That sounds a little conservative, doesn't it? I don't mean conservative party, I mean, you know, holding on to the past, not willing to change.

It's pretty clear I think that the Buddha really supported democracy as he would have known it. And there is definitely within the Sangha within the ordained Sangha a lot of democracy in the sense that monks will vote, it's not done in any formal way but through discussion and as a community they will vote for somebody to be their abbot and they'll vote for people to do certain jobs most of it's done through quiet conversations. But generally speaking, you always have a general agreement as to who the abbot is, for instance.

So when I was at Kanduboda, Venerable Pema Siri left to run a centre in Colombo. And it was a particular

monk who decided that since he was the elder, he was therefore the abbot. But actually, most everybody else wanted this other monk to be the abbot who was the teacher of *Vipassanā*. Because Kanduboda itself was a *Vipassanā* center. That's what it was meant to do. It had a throughput of something like a thousand lay people throughout the year.

Anyway, he became quite paranoid. I rather liked him. He was very good on the Vinaya, kept us all in order. He had a certain authoritarian feel about him, which is sometimes good. And he became quite paranoid because obviously he could feel that people didn't want him, that the monks didn't want him. And as a story, I mean, I was there at the time, actually. He came out of his hut, his *kuṭi*, one day, and there were these scratches on the floor. And he accused people of putting a hex on him, that somebody had come along and put a hex on him. And he determined, I know it's very strange to hear this, he determined to murder the monks.

And every morning, five of them used to go and chant together. And he went up and picked up a chair, it seems, and hit the first monk on the head, broke his nose, it seems. And by that time, of course, the other monks had woken up and were able to stop him. He eventually went and stayed with Venerable Pema Siri for some time. It's interesting that the police weren't called in or any attempt to disrobe him or anything like that. He went to live with somebody whom he did respect, Venerable Pema Siri, and eventually went off to monastery and nobody ever heard of him, or I never heard of him again since.

So that's what happens in the extreme where you don't want it. But as I say, generally speaking, everything is done on an understanding of everybody has an influence on who is going to be the abbot. And the abbot in Theravāda Buddhism is the central figure of the institution they are independent monasteries and once a monastery begins to fail there's not much effort to try and save it, it's presumed that there's you know it's time for it fail and that's the end of it or disappear.

In harmony the assembly in harmony, self-respect of elders so the next one is as long as the Vajjis honour respect and esteem and venerate the Vajji elders so I suppose we could translate this into our experts like the economists. Have we do we honour respect and esteem and venerate economists and all these other people who are supposed to be experts so that's something we can contemplate.

As long as the Vajjis do not abduct women and girls from their families and force them to live with them. That's an interesting piece there. I don't know what was going on at the time, but obviously there was an abuse of women and girls, which of course won't come as a surprise in a patriarchal society.

As long as the Vajjis honour respect and esteem and venerate their traditional shrines so these are honouring the gods really and that's interesting the Buddha didn't denounce other people's beliefs or anything. I remember well there's one occasion when somebody comes to the Buddha and says you know your followers they're still offering making offerings at different shrines and he says, he says, there's no harm in it. So, you know, just let them do it. It's not a problem.

So what would be our traditional shrines, I wonder, in a society which is very multicultural, multi-religious? I mean, we still have churches and gurdwaras, mosques, temples, mosques. But I suppose if we were talking about the UK as a whole, it would have to be the established church and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Other countries, of course, have completely eliminated the church from any doings within the politics or running of the country. But here there's a tenuous hold. In others, of course, it's much stronger. Those of you from other parts of Europe will know, will be able to relate to that. But as soon as you start losing respect for these people, then in a sense, you're into secularism, really. I mean, you know, because this relates to religion, you see.

And the last one, too, he's talking about Arahats. He's talking about people who you honour for one reason or another as being good human beings. We could extend it to that and that they are honoured.

So those are the seven principles that the Buddha thought would stop the Licchavis from decline and being attacked. And of course, they were unfortunate in letting this Vasakāra in. And before they knew it, they became vassals of the king of Magadha, the dreadful Ajātasattu.

So I was just thinking maybe some of you also had some reflections. I'd be happy to receive them and bring them up tomorrow.

The scriptures have the Buddhist time have you know obviously certain pointers for us but it's a very different society in many ways but even so the basic principles remain the same you know harmony and he's big on harmony and that's what that's what we have to work towards.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance that they have not caused even greater confusion and that you will consider or continue to practice for even greater wisdom.

So it's time to do a little bit of sitting.

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