

Buddha Counsels Arjuna

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Arjuna: Thanks, O Awakened One [Buddha], for giving me an appointment at a short notice. I have come on leave of absence from the Kurukshetra War, which took a hell of a lot convincing before Yudhishtir bhayya agreed.

Let me tell you briefly why I have come to you. To be sure, I did go to the battlefield voluntarily and in my full senses because I was basically cheesed off with the unreasonable and unjust stance of the Kauravas. But, upon reaching the battlefield and taking a look at the armies and commanders arrayed on both sides, it struck me that it may not be worth it after all to go ahead with the war. The spoils of victory did not seem that appealing in the face of bloodshed and having to kill my own sires, teachers, and kinsmen. I sort of decided to turn my back on the battlefield, though I should say I was not 100% certain if that would be the right step. Because, as you might have known dear K was my charioteer, I thought he might help clear up my confusion, so I turned to him for advice.

K was of the opinion that it would be cowardice to thus run away from the battlefield, which would bring me infamy. K also reminded me that if I do not fight the Kurukshetra War, then I will be reneging on my duty, which was to uphold dharma given that I was a king, even if it meant taking up arms to do so. In fighting such a righteous war, I was not going to incur any sin, and would attain and enjoy the kingdom, if successful, or the highest heaven that a warrior can attain, if I died on the battlefield.

K said what we are in actuality is the Self. The five elements do not touch or affect the Self because it is beyond them. So, to talk of the killer and the killed is meaningless because the soul is eternal and immortal. The body is only like a garment for the Self. What gets killed is only the body, and hence I need not be squeamish about it.

He was thus calling upon me to become a man of wisdom. When I asked him what the characteristics were of a man of wisdom, K said, he is one whose mind is not troubled by sorrow, who does not go after pleasures, who is free from attachment, fear and hatred, renounces completely all the desires of the mind, is fully satisfied with his mind fixed in the Self, not swayed by the pairs of opposites, and goes about his life with an equanimous mind.

Then, K said, what is important is performing one's duty without obsessing about the fruits of your actions. The other important thing he said about action is that I, as the soul, am ever a non-doer because what is acting in the world is the body-mind complex, which is driven by the triple-fold qualities like tamas, rajas, and sattva. So, he advised action without the sense of doership. If one performs action in the said manner then one attains the highest goal of life, namely, salvation.

Tamas is characterized by sloth, dullness, confusion and ignorance; rajas is characterized by passions, ambition, drive to succeed, greed, etc.; sattva is characterized by clarity, harmony, peace, happiness, equanimity under all circumstances, knowledge etc.

K also taught me how to meditate, what is devotion to the supreme godhead, what are the various castes among men and their natures and suitable occupations, what kinds of foods to eat, etc.

It seemed to me that he was advocating many different things, like action, renunciation, meditation, and devotion. So, you can imagine how I was confused as to what was the best course of action among these seemingly four different paths. K said without hesitation that the path of action without a sense of doership, without an eye on the fruits of action, accepting whatever falls to one's lot with an equanimous mind, and dedicating all one's actions to God was the best path among all.

Be that as it may, I have come to you seeking a second opinion on the matter, to come to a firm conviction on which road to take because I find myself really and literally at a crossroads. So, please spare me some of your valuable time and enlighten me further on these issues as per your way of seeing things.

Buddha: Arjuna, well spoken indeed. I can understand your anguish and mental state. K did indeed say words of wisdom, but ultimately, he has told you all the medicines available, but what is the use of knowing that unless you know what your disease is, so that you can take the appropriate medicine.

But, tell me one thing, when you say you do not know which of the four paths to follow that K showed, what is the destination you are trying to reach, because, after all, roads and paths are meant to take you to your destination.

Arjuna: Well, I guess I have never really given that matter much thought. It seems like at every step of the way in my life, there seemed to be a goal

that made sense to follow at that time, like learning archery when young, discharging the role of a king when a little older, getting married and becoming a householder with an eye on perpetuating the royal lineage, etc. Thus, I was journeying my life until my cousins screwed up my life, thanks also to my Yudhishtir bhayya's awful addiction to dice, by sending us to the forest for 13 years, where mere survival seemed the order of the day, without really indulging in any deep questioning. Upon returning from the forest, things just snowballed into the Kurukshetra War, and so here I am at your feet seeking your counsel.

Buddha: I agree that you have been into different things depending on what junction of life you found yourself at, sort of following a natural and set pattern of life for someone in a royal family. But, when you were learning archery, or ruling the kingdom, or getting married, or surviving in the forest, tell me, was there anything common to all of those endeavours of yours that would bind them together under one category.

Arjuna: You mean was there a common end that I was trying to achieve with those various means?

Buddha: Yes, indeed.

Arjuna: Perhaps, I was pursuing happiness and satisfaction through those various activities and means.

Buddha: That's it. You, and indeed as any other man or woman on this planet earth of ours, undertake action only to obtain happiness and satisfaction that seems to be missing or less in your life at present. But, tell me, through these various efforts of yours, have you found what you are looking for? Have you found the happiness and satisfaction you were looking for?

Arjuna: That is a bit tricky to answer. I sort of can neither say I have found happiness nor say that I have not found happiness. You see, all these activities and pursuits have given me happiness, but it was not lasting, and faded away very quickly from my being and so I had to again pursue this seemingly elusive happiness.

Buddha: So, what you are saying is that you did not find lasting happiness. Of course, along this journey there must have been moments when you were unhappy or sad. But, more interestingly, can you say that when you thought you were happy, however momentarily, were you happy without a shadow of doubt, that is, completely happy or 100% happy?

Arjuna: I guess not. Even in my moments of happiness, I always felt the uncertainty of how long the happiness would last, and when I would be subject to sorrow because life is uncertain.

Buddha: Bingo! That is why I formulated my First Noble Truth as "Life is dukkha". Dukkha is typically used to describe things such as sickness, aging, accidents, and physical and emotional pain. Of course, many people tend to interpret dukkha as suffering. That is not quite it. The correct way is to understand dukkha as dissatisfaction, because when you are in sorrow it goes without saying that you are dissatisfied; but, when you are happy also, there is an underlying dissatisfaction that the happiness is fleeting and will soon come to an end. Humans are rarely ever satisfied or content. Once one desire is met, another desire is created. This is a vicious cycle. Life in its totality is imperfect and incomplete, because our world is subject to impermanence. The Three Marks of Existence are 1. Impermanence (anitya), 2. Not-Self (anatma), 3. Dissatisfaction (dukkha) - impermanence forming the basis for not-self and dissatisfaction.

Arjuna: Then, what is one to do?

Buddha: You have to investigate how dukkha comes about, what is its cause. If you can find its cause, then we can ask further whether we can end or extinguish that cause, and if so, how? So, what do you think is the cause of dukkha?

Arjuna: What makes me dissatisfied? Well, I guess when what I get falls short of my expectations, or there is fear that I may not get what I am expecting. So, if I do not expect anything, then, I cannot be dissatisfied, right?

Buddha: Well put. That brings me to my Second Noble Truth. I have formulated it as, "The cause of dukkha is craving or desire." But, your formulation of it is also acceptable because, after all, what is desire but a form of expectation. Your expecting something to happen or be the case is your desire for that state of affairs.

Arjuna: So, given that we have zeroed in on the cause of dukkha, what difference does that make?

Buddha: That is my Third Noble Truth, that, "Cessation of dukkha is attainable [through the cessation of its cause]".

Arjuna: I don't know if that is possible. If I try to be without desire or expectation, I guess my mind would go blank for the moment, but sooner or

later thoughts would come rushing in, and I would be back in a state of desiring or expecting. I do not see a way out of it.

Buddha: Let me assure you that there is a way to end desire. You need not accept my words based on faith. Test it out.

Arjuna: That is very reassuring, but how do I test it out?

Buddha: Ah, here I will introduce you to my Fourth Noble Truth, which says that, "The path to cessation of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path."

Arjuna: Oh, is that so? I am very eager to know what this Noble Eightfold Path is.

Buddha: The Eightfold Path comprises the following.

The first two pertain to Wisdom.

(1) **Right View**—Right view is the cognitive aspect of wisdom. It means to see things through, to grasp the impermanent and imperfect nature of worldly objects and ideas, and to understand the law of karma and karmic conditioning.

(2) **Right Intention**—Right intention refers to the volitional aspect of wisdom, i.e. the kind of mental energy that controls our actions. Right intention can be described best as *commitment* to ethical and mental self-improvement.

The next three pertain to Ethical Conduct.

(3) **Right Speech**—This is the first principle of ethical conduct in the eightfold path. This means to tell the truth, to speak friendly, warmly, and gently, and to talk only when necessary.

(4) **Right Action**—It means to act kindly and compassionately, to be honest, to respect the belongings of others, and to keep sexual relationships harmless to others.

(5) **Right Livelihood**—This means that one should earn one's living in a righteous way and that wealth should be gained legally and peacefully. It means that one should abstain from making one's living through a profession that brings harm to others, such as trading in arms and lethal weapons, intoxicating drinks or poisons, killing animals, cheating, etc.

The last three pertain to Mental Development.

(6) **Right Effort**—This is preventing the arising of unwholesome states, and the generation of wholesome states. The unwholesome states are those relating to thoughts, emotions, intentions, and these include the five hindrances – sensual thoughts, doubts about the path, restlessness, drowsiness, and ill will of any kind.

(7) **Right Mindfulness**—It is the mental ability to see things as they are, with clear consciousness. Usually, the cognitive process begins with an impression induced by perception, or by a thought, but then it does not stay with the mere impression. We interpret them and set them in relation to other thoughts and experiences, almost half consciously, and as a result we often see things obscured. Right mindfulness is anchored in clear perception and it penetrates impressions without getting carried away.

(8) **Right Concentration**—Right concentration means *wholesome concentration*, i.e., concentration on wholesome thoughts and actions through the practice of meditation. The meditating mind focuses on a selected object. It first directs itself onto it, then sustains concentration, and finally intensifies concentration step by step. Through this practice it becomes natural to apply elevated levels concentration also in everyday situations.

Arjuna: Oh, that is quite a handful. It seems like the most important step is the last one, Right Concentration, all the rest being preparatory for this step to be successful.

Buddha: You are right. The first seven factors are the supports and requisite conditions for Right Concentration. However, the divisions of the noble eightfold path are to be developed more or less simultaneously, as far as possible according to the capacity of each individual. They are all linked together and each helps the cultivation of the others. These factors are not sequential, but components, and with a certain degree of progress all eight factors can be present simultaneously, each supporting the others. However, until that point is reached, some sequence in the unfolding of the path is inevitable.

Arjuna: Don't think I am arrogant, but I feel I am rightly equipped to go straight to meditation, living as I have an ethical life, and having imbued wisdom from K and you. So, could you tell me what to expect as I progress

in meditation and become better and better at it? What is the culmination of meditation?

Buddha: Ok, I won't say you are being arrogant, but if your preparation is not sufficient, then you will encounter serious obstacles in meditation and it will not progress smoothly. So, you can begin with meditation, and correct your course along the way as the need arises.

There are eight stages of meditative absorption that you will pass through if you stick to it. First, you will become detached from sensual objects and unwholesome consciousness, and experience rapture and joy. Second, you will become free from discursive thinking, and experience rapture and joy. Third, you will progress to equanimity and attentive mind. Fourth, you go beyond pleasure and pain. Fifth, you reach boundless space and abide therein. Sixth, you reach boundless consciousness and abide therein. Seventh, you reach the sphere of nothingness and abide therein. Eighth, you reach the sphere of neither-perception nor-non-perception, beyond name and form, and abide therein. That is Nirvana, and you would have gone beyond the realm of dukkha.

Arjuna: Cool!! I will give it a try and see where it takes me.

Buddha: So, does that mean that you will not go back to the Kurukshetra War?

Arjuna: I am not sure. Anyway, there is no place as of now that I can call mine until we regain our kingdom. So, do you mind if I hang around in your ashram and sort things out in my mind.

Buddha: Be my guest.