

## *The Armored Car*

*January 20, 2023*

There are times in the Pali Canon when Ven. Ananda seem to be playing the straight man. He'll make an ill-considered comment, and the Buddha will have to correct him—as when he stated that dependent co-arising seemed very simple, and the Buddha said, “No, it's very complex. It's because it's so complex that beings are still entangled in suffering.” Or when he said that admirable friendship is half of the holy life, and the Buddha said, “No, it's the whole of the holy life.” Not that admirable friendship will do everything for you, but if you have an admirable friend like the Buddha, that's when you know that it's possible to follow the path, and that it's a good path. Without the Buddha, where would we be?

There was another time when a brahman drove past in a chariot, all white—the horses were white, the chariot itself was white, the wheels were white, the upholstery was white, the parasol was white. And Ananda said, “My, what a sublime vehicle!” And the Buddha said, “If you want to know a real sublime vehicle, look at the noble eightfold path.” He then gave a very extended simile, comparing the parts of a chariot to aspects of the practice—not just the factors of the path, but other factors to go along with the path as well.

Of course, nowadays we're not familiar with the parts of a chariot, but some of the parts correspond to parts of an automobile. And sometimes it's good to think about these similes, to see what you can learn about how the Buddha regarded the different qualities of the path.

The horses, he said, were conviction and discernment. That, of course would correspond to the engine of the car. This is what drives us: our conviction that we don't want to stay stuck in suffering, that there's a path out, and that we're capable of doing it. In other words, we have conviction in the Dhamma and we have conviction in ourselves.

If we don't have conviction in ourselves, our engine sputters. Like the car I had when I was a teenager: If you stepped on the gas, it would stop for a bit to consider things before it took off. And it didn't take off very fast. I never felt completely safe driving it. So you want to make sure your conviction and your discernment are fine-tuned.

And it's interesting that the Buddha put these two together. You don't want your conviction to be gullible. You want to think carefully about what's worthy of

respect, what's worth listening to and what's worth following, and what's not. The Buddha wouldn't recommend that you have conviction in just anything.

The idea that all paths lead to the same goal has never been true in the world outside, and it's certainly not true inside either. So you have to be very discerning in how you choose a path, choose the way you want to be practicing, realizing that this is the engine that powers you. Discernment is part of that engine.

The axles, the Buddha said, are *jhāna*. They may turn around but they've got a still center. You want to have that centered quality to your concentration, so that you can carry it out into the world. If you're sitting around talking all the time, you have to ask yourself, "Where is my concentration right now?" You've lost your axle, so try to reestablish it. We establish it as we sit here with our eyes closed, but then we also try to keep that sense of still center as we go moving around through the world. As we discussed this afternoon, the center doesn't have to be one particular spot, but there has to be an area inside your body where you feel, "This is my stillness."

To switch analogies, I knew a botanist one time who said that there's a part of every plant that has to be still. From that part, when the plant is damaged, the repair work happens. And if that part gets damaged itself, then the plant is going to die. In the same way, this still center inside is what helps us repair a lot of the damage that the world does to us and that we do to ourselves.

We really do have to work on this sense of stillness, because around the axle turn the wheels, and the wheels are right effort. Notice that back in those days the wheels didn't provide the power, it was the horses. But the fact that the wheels were able to turn around allowed the chariot to move so that it didn't have to be dragged.

In the same way, your efforts should be aimed at making things easy. You make things easy for yourself by not giving in to unskillful qualities. Every time you give in to something unskillful, you have to remind yourself that you're making things hard. You're simply reinforcing old ruts, old bad habits, in the mind. The more you give in, give in, give in to your defilements, the harder it becomes to follow the path.

So you really do have to make that effort. It may seem as if you're making it hard for yourself now, but even if it is hard now, it's going to be easier down the line because you've made this effort. There are so many Dhamma teachers who say, "Well, nibbana is the ultimate ease, the ultimate rest, so the path should be an easeful, restful path. After all, you can't do something stressful to get to rest." But that's like saying smoke comes from fire, therefore fire should be black, too. Causes are not necessarily the same as their results.

Ajaan Suwat made a comparison one time. He said that when you're eating, there's an effort that goes into eating. You have to chew your food. You have to select which foods to eat, which foods not to eat, and your body has to do the work of digestion. The sense of fullness that comes from all that activity is something else. The sense that your body feels well balanced, well-nourished, is not the same thing as all the work that goes into getting it nourished.

So remember that the effort may seem hard, but it's actually making things easier, just as having wheels on the chariot makes it a lot easier for the chariot to move.

Back in those days, chariots were also vehicles of war. The Buddha said the noble chariot has weapons and a shield. It's really interesting that the weapons are non-ill will, harmlessness, and seclusion, the sub-factors of right resolve. We don't think of ourselves as bristling with weapons when we're following right resolve, but that's what the Buddha is talking about there.

Seclusion there would be seclusion from unskillful qualities, seclusion from sensuality. It basically means realizing that the causes of suffering come from within, from our own unskillful behavior, so a better part of wisdom is to say, "I'm not going to have ill will for anyone, because if I have ill will, I'm going to start acting in unskillful ways. I have to be harmless. And I have to try to overcome my fascination with sensuality."

It's interesting that those are weapons. That's how you defend yourself against the world, because the world is going to do a lot of things that would make it very easy for you to feel ill will, to want to do harm, to want to play out your sensual fantasies. So this is your protection: having right resolve no matter what the world does. You're going to maintain your skillful resolves

Then the shield for the chariot is endurance. Whatever the world throws at you, you learn how to take it. You don't constantly let your feelings be hurt. You have to keep reminding yourself, "If something's being thrown at me, I threw it at somebody in the past." That helps to deal with the sense of righteousness that comes when you feel like you've been wronged. Actually, you've been wrong in the past, too. And whatever the back and forth that goes on in the world, endurance is going to be really useful. People can do unskillful things and you just put up with it; they do it again and you put up with it again. That really is your protection—your shield, or the armor for your car.

So you've got an armored car here, powered by conviction and discernment. And the driver is mindfulness. As the Buddha says, it's a protective driver. You drive in such a way that you keep the vehicle safe. Mindfulness, of course, is the ability to keep things in mind. And what we keep in mind is the Buddha, the

Dhamma, and the Sangha. We start with the fact that there was a Buddha. He found this path. The path is still alive. It's still an open option. It's so easy to forget that as you get involved in the affairs of the world.

But you've got to remember that what's really important in life is the fact that we have this opportunity to practice, that we remember the Dhamma: What does the Dhamma have to say about what's skillful, what's not skillful? Those teachings are never out of date. After all, the Buddha said they're *akālika*, timeless.

Then you remember the Sangha. Sometimes the Buddha seems far away, 2,600 years ago, on the other side of the world. But we do have the noble Sangha still alive, still practicing, still able to bear witness that, yes, the Buddha's teachings, when you put them into practice, really do give results.

So try to keep these things in mind. After all, you can have a great chariot, you can have a great armored car, but if you don't have a mindful driver, then either the car just sits there or the driver can be dangerous. So be a good driver. Your sublime vehicle is ready and waiting. You have the potentials for all these qualities already within you. There is a potential for conviction, a potential for discernment. Right resolve. Patience and endurance. Jhana. Effort and mindfulness. These are all qualities that human beings have. It's simply the question of whether you're going to develop these qualities—or are you going to develop something unskillful? The Buddha offers training in skillfulness, but all too often we train ourselves in unskillfulness. We don't think of it as a training, but as we give into our unskillful habits, or unskillful tendencies, that's how we train ourselves.

So be convinced that you do have good potentials within you and try to make the most of them.