



The Buddha and His Son

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Abstract

This article surveys interactions between the Buddha and his son as reported in Pāli discourses and their parallels. Although by going forth as monastics both had left behind the secular setting of family life, the teachings the Buddha gave to Rāhula can be taken to exemplify qualities relevant to mindful parenting. Besides, teaching emerges as an activity that facilitates not only the progress of others to liberation but can also achieve the same purpose for the one who gives such teachings.

Keywords Awakening · Buddha's Son · Falsehood · Not Self · Rāhula · Renunciation · Teaching

The challenges of parenting are not a prominent concern of the early Buddhist discourses. Nevertheless, a perspective on this topic could be developed based on taking up the case of the relationship between the Buddha and his son Rāhula. One of the qualities shared by all awakened ones is the continuous presence of mindfulness (DN 34 and DĀ 10; Anālayo 2020b). As this clearly applies to the case of the Buddha, the ways he taught his own son would invariably have to be considered instances of his being in the possession of mindfulness. Although by going forth the Buddha had stepped out of the responsibilities of family life, his teachings to Rāhula provide clues relevant to parenting in the sense of promoting and supporting the emotional, social, and intellectual development of a child.

The Buddha's Going Forth

The first episode relevant to the relationship between the Buddha and his son concerns the former's going forth to become a homeless renunciant in quest of liberation. The early discourses report that the future Buddha's parents were in tears when he decided to leave the household life:

[Although] my mother and father did not like it and were crying with tearful faces, I shaved off my hair and beard, donned yellow robes, and went forth from the household to homelessness.

(MN 26: *akāmakānaṃ mātāpitūnaṃ assumukhānaṃ rudantānaṃ kesamassuṃ ohāretvā kāsāyāni vatthāni acchādetvā agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajim*).

[Although] my father and mother were crying and all my relatives were displeased, I shaved off my hair and beard, donned yellow robes, and out of faith left the household life to become homeless and train in the path. (MĀ 204: 父母啼哭，諸親不樂，我剃除鬚髮，著袈裟衣，至信捨家，無家，學道).

This puts into perspective a well-known account, according to which the Buddha-to-be had secretly left his home in order to go forth (Anālayo 2017). This account is a product of later times and in conflict with the above passages, whose description implies that the future Buddha went forth in spite of his parents displaying sorrow, which he would not have been able to witness had he left secretly.

A version of this later hagiographical account, extant in the Pāli *Jātakanidāna*, reports that he took a last look at his recently born son, finding that the boy was resting in his mother's arms, both of them being fast asleep. This led to his reflection:

If I were to remove the queen's hand and would hug my son, the queen will wake up and that will be an

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obstruction to my going. Having become a Buddha, I will come back and see my son.

(Jā I 62: *sac' āhaṃ deviṃyā hatthaṃ apānetvā mama puttāṃ gaṇhissāmi devī pabujjhissati, evaṃ me gamanantarāyo bhavissati ti. buddho hutvā va āgantvā puttāṃ passissāmi ti*).

Although the moving scene depicted in this way is a product of later times, the early texts do report that, after his awakening, the Buddha came back to visit his family. This is thus the next episode relevant to exploring the relationship between the Buddha and his son.

Rāhula's Going Forth

The Pāli *Vinaya* reports that, when the Buddha came to visit his hometown and family, after having successfully reached awakening, his former wife instructed her son in the following manner:

Rāhula, this is your father. Go and ask for your inheritance!

(Vin I 82: *eso te, rāhula, pitā. gacchassu dāyajjaṃ yācāhī ti*).

When Rāhula did as he was told, according to the Pāli *Vinaya* this led to the unfolding of the following sequence of events:

Then the boy Rāhula followed closely behind the Blessed One [saying]: “Recluse, give me my inheritance; recluse, give me my inheritance.” Then the Blessed One said to the venerable Sāriputta: “Well, then, Sāriputta, give the going forth to the boy Rāhula.”

(Vin I 82: *atha kho rāhulo kumāro bhagavantaṃ piṭṭhito piṭṭhito anubandhi: dāyajjaṃ me, samaṇa, dehi; dāyajjaṃ me, samaṇa, dehī ti. atha kho bhagavā āyasmantaṃ sāriputtaṃ āmantesi: tena hi tvaṃ, sāriputta, rāhulakumāraṃ pabbājehī ti*).

According to the Pāli commentary, this was not quite the inheritance Rāhula's mother had been intending (Sp V 1009). From the viewpoint of the Buddha, however, this was the type of inheritance really worth passing on to others: a monastic life wholeheartedly dedicated to progress to awakening. This was his true heritage, and the ensuing events prove him right, as Rāhula did eventually become a fully awakened one himself.

The storyline found in the Pāli *Vinaya* is supported by several parallel versions, summarized by Frauwallner (1956, p. 76) in this manner: “The former wife of the Buddha sends him his little son Rāhula to claim from

him his heritage, whereupon the Buddha charges Śāriputra with admitting Rāhula in the order.” Unlike the story of the future Buddha's secret departure to go forth, his getting his son ordained in response to the request to pass on his heritage pertains to an early level of textual accounts.

This episode in a way sets the background against which to consider the ensuing teaching relationship between the Buddha and Rāhula, showing the overarching importance of soteriological over secular concerns. The clear emphasis on the superiority of renunciation, compared with family life, that emerges in this way needs to be kept in mind when considering possible parallels between the way the Buddha taught his son and parenting.

Inculcating Moral Principles in Rāhula

Several discourses report teachings given by the Buddha to his son. The first of these, in terms of apparent time of delivery, takes the form of a visit paid by the Buddha to the place where Rāhula was staying. According to the Pāli commentary, Rāhula was seven years old at the time of this visit (Ps III 124). This would imply that the present episode happened quite soon after his going forth, described above. Although the two discourse versions of this teaching do not provide a narrative background, another parallel found in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* (T 1442) offers the following additional information:

At that time there were many devout brahmins, householders, etc., who approached [Rāhula's] place and asked him: “Venerable, where does the Blessed One stay at present?” If the Buddha, the Blessed One, was in the Bamboo Grove, then Rāhula would in turn reply: “He is on Mount Vulture Peak.” If [the Buddha] was on Mount Vulture Peak, he would reply: “He is in the Bamboo Grove.”

(T XXIII 760b: 時有眾多敬信婆羅門居士等來詣其所, 問言: 大德, 世尊今者住在何處? 若佛世尊在竹林中, 時羅枯羅即便報云: 在鷲峯山. 若在鷲峯山, 報云: 在竹林中; see also D 3 cha 215a or P 1032 je 199b).

A somewhat comparable account can also be found in the **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (T 1509).

[If] people came and asked [Rāhula]: “Is the Blessed One in?”, he would deceive them by saying: “He is not in.” If, when [the Buddha] was not in, people asked Rāhula: “Is the Blessed One in?”, he would deceive them by saying: “The Buddha is in.”

(T XXV 158a: 人來問之: 世尊在不? 詭言: 不在. 若不在時, 人問羅睺羅: 世尊在不? 詭言: 佛在).

The Pāli commentary does not report that Rāhula had told visitors that the Buddha was away when in reality he was in or else that he sent them to the wrong place. However, it does record the Buddha being motivated to deliver the present discourse based on the following reflection:

Young boys indeed enjoy speaking falsehood, saying “we saw” when they did not see and “we did not see” when they saw.

(Ps III 125: *daharakumārā nāma piyamusāvādā honti, adiṭṭham eva diṭṭham amhehī ti, diṭṭham eva na diṭṭham amhehī ti vadanti*).

Although this information stems from textual sources later than the early discourses, the assumption that Rāhula had been engaging in some sort of boyish mischief involving falsehoods would fit the teaching given to him well, as it starts off precisely on the topic of speaking lies.

Granting some such narrative background, the Buddha’s way of teaching his son is significant. When the Buddha arrived, in keeping with a standard custom of receiving a respected visitor, Rāhula prepared a seat for him and offered water for washing the feet. Since in ancient India monastics walked barefoot, before sitting down there was a need to wash one’s feet. Having used most of the water to wash his feet and shown Rāhula a little bit of water still left in the water container, according to the two discourse versions the following exchange ensued:

[The Buddha said]: “Rāhula, do you see this little remainder of water left in the water vessel?” [Rāhula replied]: “Yes, venerable sir.” [The Buddha said]: “Rāhula, as little as that is the recluseship of those who are not ashamed of knowingly speaking falsehood.”

(MN 61: *passasi no tvaṃ, rāhula, imaṃ parittam udakāvasesaṃ udakādhāne ṭhapitan ti? evaṃ, bhante. evaṃ parittakaṃ kho, rāhula, tesam sāmāññaṃ yesam natthi sampajānamusāvāde lajjā ti*).

[The Buddha said]: “Rāhula, did you see me now take this water vessel and pour it out, with a little of the water being left?” Rāhula replied: “I saw it, Blessed One.” The Buddha said to Rāhula: “I say that as little as that is also their practice, namely of those who knowingly speak falsehood without being embarrassed, without regret, without shame, and without scruple.”

(MĀ 14: 羅云, 汝今見我取此水器瀉留少水耶? 羅云答曰: 見也, 世尊! 佛告羅云: 我說彼道少亦復如是, 謂知已妄言, 不羞, 不悔, 無慚, 無愧).

Rather than directly confronting Rāhula with a stern rebuke, according to the above report the Buddha approached the matter indirectly. The statement he made is not expressed in personal terms, such as saying “you” did or should not do such and such a thing. Instead, it is just a general statement relating the speaking of falsehood to a sense of shame. Moreover, the teaching given in this way comes with a vivid illustration taken right from the situation in which the two happen to find themselves. The comparison with the water left in the vessel is in line with a general propensity of the Buddha, evident in the discourses, to employ similes and metaphors for the sake of illustration (Hecker 2009). In the present case, he continued exploring this same imagery in additional ways. The discourse parallels report that the Buddha next poured out the rest of the water, comparing the nature of one who deliberately speaks falsehood with water that has been thrown away. Then, the Buddha took the empty vessel and put it upside down, serving to illustrate the upside-down nature of those who intentionally lie.

In this way, by employing a utensil that Rāhula must have been using daily, the Buddha provided readily understood illustrations that can safely be expected to have left a deep impression in the mind of his son, coming to his mind whenever he used that water vessel again. Underlying the whole exchange is the Buddha’s kind and benevolent disposition, which made him express the needful in a way that allowed Rāhula to become fully aware of the reprehensible nature of speaking falsehood without feeling personally hurt.

Perhaps by way of providing some inspiration, next the Buddha described the behavior of an elephant in battle. Due to the high regard accorded to elephants in the ancient Indian setting, employing the imagery of a battle elephant would have been a skillful way of further captivating the attention of a little boy. Following the imagery of the elephant comes still another illustration in the following form:

[The Buddha said]: “Rāhula, what do you think is the purpose of a mirror?” [Rāhula replied]: “Venerable sir, its purpose is to reflect.”

(MN 61: *taṃ kiṃ maññasi, rāhula, kimatthiyo ādāso ti? paccavekkhaṇattho, bhante ti*).

[The Buddha said]: “What do you think, for what do people use a mirror?” Venerable Rāhula replied: “Blessed One, they wish to examine their face and see if it is clean or dirty.”

(MĀ 14: 於意云何, 人用鏡為? 尊者羅云答曰: 世尊, 欲觀其面, 見淨不淨).

This simile then leads on to a detailed exposition on how one should similarly reflect before doing something, while doing it, and after having done it, in order to discern its ethical quality. As noted by Crosby (2013,

p. 115), “this teaching offers the child a straight-forward definition of wholesome and unwholesome action.” The detailed instructions given based on the mirror simile make up the main body of the discourse (Anālayo 2011).

Looking back on the overall teaching pattern, the instructions appear to be well tailored to the situation of a young boy. The series of illustrations based on the water vessel drive home quite strikingly the need to refrain from speaking falsehood. The description of the elephant in battle provides inspiration, and the mirror simile serves as a succinct reference point for the ensuing main teaching. Just as one looks into a mirror to examine one’s face, in the same way one should regularly examine one’s mental condition. The mirror simile occurs elsewhere to illustrate mindfulness of states of mind (Anālayo 2020a), making it fairly safe to assume that its basic import is related to mindfulness practice. From this perspective, the instruction can be considered to be an implicit invitation to Rāhula to cultivate mindfulness, in particular of his own mental condition.

The teaching given to Rāhula in this way appears to have had a profound positive impact on him. According to a listing of eminent disciples outstanding for a particular quality, Rāhula eventually became foremost among those willing to train themselves (AN 1.14.3: *sikkhākāmānaṃ*) or those who do not break the precepts (EĀ 4.6: 不毀禁戒). In spite of using different terminology, the two qualifications point to a similar attitude of keen concern with the ethical quality of one’s actions, which is indeed the attitude inculcated with the present discourse.

The teaching approach evident in the above episode appears to be in line with principles of mindful parenting, in the way this has been conceived in the contemporary mindfulness movement. Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn (2014, p. 259) offer the following description:

Most important is to be a presence in their lives and to see and accept them for who they actually are, and find imaginative ways to meet them where they are over the expanse of childhood, adolescence, and beyond.

In short, “we can reject their behavior without rejecting them” (p. 70).

Insight Teachings to Rāhula

The early discourses report several teachings given by the Buddha to Rāhula, all of which would presumably have happened subsequent to the one surveyed above. Most of these are short discourses that are in one way

or another related to insight into not self (SN 18.1–22, SN 22.91, SN 22.92, AN 4.177, SĀ 23, SĀ 24, SĀ 198, SĀ 199, SĀ 465, SĀ 897; Anālayo 2012). These discourses do not provide a narrative, explaining the circumstances of their delivery, and for this reason are less relevant to appreciating the interactions between the Buddha and his son.

Fortunately, another discourse containing insight instructions to Rāhula has an introductory narration, which helps place the instruction in context. According to this narration, the Buddha had gone on his daily begging round together with Rāhula. On their way, the Buddha suddenly turned around and told Rāhula to contemplate the nature of the aggregate of form, representative of the body. According to the Pāli commentary, Rāhula had been congratulating himself on having inherited some of the Buddha’s physical splendor (Ps III 132). Becoming aware of such vain thinking through his telepathic abilities, the Buddha took the occasion to encourage Rāhula to contemplate in the following ways:

Rāhula, whatever form, be it past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, it should be seen with right wisdom as it really is in this way: all form is not mine, is not what I am, and is not my self.

(MN 62: *yaṃ kiñci, rāhula, rūpaṃ atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ ajjhataṃ vā bahiddhā vā oḷārikaṃ vā sukhumāṃ vā hīnaṃ vā pañītaṃ vā yaṃ dūre santike vā, sabbāṃ rūpaṃ n’ etaṃ mama, n’ eso ’ham asmi, na meso attā ti evaṃ etaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabban ti*).

You should now contemplate form as being impermanent. (EĀ 17.1: 汝今當觀色為無常).

Although the actual instructions differ, the two discourse parallels agree that Rāhula was so stirred by the instruction that he decided to forgo begging for food and instead immediately sat down to meditate. Such behavior would be well in line with the Pāli listing of eminent disciples, mentioned above, according to which he became foremost among those willing to train themselves.

Both discourse versions report an amplification of the same instruction to cover the other four aggregates as well, an amplification that according to the Pāli version had been requested by Rāhula himself. The remainder of the two discourses records additional instructions given to Rāhula by either Sāriputta or the Buddha, covering mindfulness of breathing and the *brahmavihāras*.

The teachings given on this occasion differ from the instruction given with the help of the similes of the water vessel and the mirror not only in terms of context, but also in terms of style. This appears to reflect their occurrence at a later time in the life of Rāhula. Instead of approaching the matter in a more round about manner and providing a series of illustrations, in this instance the Buddha immediately tackled the problem he had identified. This points to another dimension of his approach to educating Rāhula, reflecting the fact that successful education or parenting does at times require confronting issues head on. The instruction is of course given in a kind manner; it does not take the form of a stern rebuke. But it aims straight at the underlying issue by immediately reining in Rāhula's vain and conceited thoughts. As described by Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn (2014, p. 82):

Being accepting doesn't mean that we have to be naïve or passive in regard to our children. There will inevitably be many times when we need to step in and act decisively and wisely ... Our children may need us to rein them in, give them more structure and boundaries, provide something to come up against to slow them down, to bring them down to earth.

Rāhula's Awakening

A Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel report the Buddha's teaching that led to Rāhula's awakening. The two versions complement each other, as the Chinese discourse reports what preceded the actual teaching, to which it only refers in brief, whereas the Pāli discourse (extant twice in different Pāli collections) covers the latter in considerable detail (SĀ 200 and MN 147 or SN 35.121; see also Anālayo 2011 and Pāsādika 2004 on a divergent account of Rāhula's awakening in EĀ 17.1).

The Chinese version sets in with Rāhula requesting a teaching for intensive practice (Anālayo 2015). This request leads to the following reaction by the Buddha:

Then the Blessed One, observing that Rāhula's liberation of the mind and his wisdom were not yet mature, that he was not yet ready to receive the higher Dharma, asked Rāhula: "Have you as yet given teachings to people by way of the five aggregates of clinging?" (SĀ 200: 爾時世尊觀察羅睺羅, 心解脫, 慧未熟, 未堪任受增上法, 問羅睺羅言: 汝以授人五受陰未?).

In this way, Rāhula is encouraged to give teachings himself as a way of maturing his own understanding. The discourse continues with the same pattern happening again. When Rāhula reported that he had given teachings on the five aggregates and requested an instruction from the Buddha, the latter encouraged

him to give teachings on other key aspects of Buddhist doctrine, namely on the sense spheres and on causality. When Rāhula had done that, the Buddha encouraged him to withdraw into seclusion and reflect on the topics that he had been teaching to others. Being in seclusion, Rāhula realized:

All these teachings entirely proceed toward Nirvana, flow toward Nirvana, are ultimately established on Nirvana. (SĀ 200: 此諸法一切皆順趣涅槃, 流注涅槃, 後住涅槃).

When he reported this insight to the Buddha, the latter realized that Rāhula had by now matured sufficiently to receive the teachings required to help him awaken. Although the Pāli parallel does not cover Rāhula's teaching activities, it reports a similar reflection by the Buddha:

The states that ripen in liberation have indeed ripened in Rāhula. (MN 147: *paripakkā kho rāhulassa vimutti-paripācanīyā dhammā*).

According to both versions, the teaching given by the Buddha to Rāhula takes up all aspects of sensory experience as impermanent, as being devoid of lasting satisfaction, and as bereft of a self. Both versions of this discourse report that this teaching led Rāhula to gain full awakening.

Although the detailed report of how the Buddha encouraged Rāhula to give teachings on key doctrines and then reflect on them is found only in the Chinese version, the underlying idea is in line with a general position taken in the early discourses that teaching others is an integral part of the path to awakening. This can be seen, for example, in a listing of praiseworthy qualities required for progress to awakening. One of these is as follows:

One teaches to others in detail a teaching as one has heard and as one has learnt it. (MN 33: *yathāsutaṃ yathāpariyattaṃ dhammaṃ vitthārena paresaṃ desetā hoti*).

One is capable of analyzing and disclosing to other people the teaching as one has heard and as has received it. (SĀ 1249: 如所聞, 如所受法, 能為人分別顯示; this part is abbreviated in the original).

At the appropriate time one widely teaches what one has learnt, has heard, and has come to know. (T 123: 如所學, 所聞, 所知, 以時廣說; adopting the variant 時 instead of 是).

One widely teaches to people the teaching one has formerly heard. (EĀ 49.1: 所從聞法, 廣與人說).

The potential of teaching activity to serve as a way of also educating oneself is similarly relevant to parenting. As explained by Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn (2014, p. 24), children can

give us over and over again the chance to see ourselves in new ways, and to work at consciously asking what we can learn from any and every situation that comes up with them. We can then make choices out of this awareness that will nurture both our children's inner growth and our own.

In early Buddhist thought, the principle of learning through teaching even extends to the eventual breakthrough to awakening. This can be seen in a set of five occasions for such actual realization to take place (Anālayo 2009). Besides possibly happening when one is meditating, the breakthrough to awakening can also take place when hearing, reciting, and reflecting on the Dharma, as well as at the time of teaching it. From this perspective, teaching the Dharma to one's children could in principle become a means for all involved to progress on the path to liberation.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies performed by the author with human participants or animals.

Conflict of Interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations AN, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; D, Derge edition; DĀ, *Dīrgha-āgama* (T 1) DN *Dīrgha-nikāya*; EĀ, *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); Jā, *Jātaka*; MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; P, Peking edition; Ps, *Papañcasūdanī*; SĀ, *Saṃyukta-āgama* (T

99); SN, *Saṃyutta-nikāya*; Sp, *Samantapāsādikā*; T, Taishō edition; Vin, *Vinaya*

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