

# Living Under An Authority

- by Sister Medhini

As long as one is alive, being subject to some sort of authority or authorities is inevitable<sup>1</sup>. An authority is here meant in a rather general sense of something or someone who is in a position to exert influence or control over your behavior or circumstances, in ways that may be covert or overt.

Most of the time, an authority has to either convince, persuade or hypnotize us that to follow his rule is indeed what is for our benefit and is the best thing to do, (so that we do so of our own accord); or use more subtle ways of making life a bit less agreeable for people who don't do so, so that they will modify their behavior as a reflex, but without being generally aware of why they are doing so. As a last resort, authorities may turn to brute force. But this is unsustainable over long periods and with large numbers of people. So generally it is only used in certain extreme cases (i.e. the inmates of prisons), or extreme scenarios (war, etc.)

An example of authority benignly doing its job in the first manner would be something like city councils providing footpaths for people to walk on in cities, while the rest of the road is designated for cars. I've never heard anyone complaining about the curtailment of their freedom to walk in whatever part of the road they please. I would bet that very few people even see this as an imposed structure on their behavior by an authority, (although it is). The arrangement is simply taken for granted, for the rather good reason that it factually works. And there is a generally shared understanding of this.

Obviously, it would be good - ideal - if every form of imposed structure on people's behavior by authorities, could be like this; and would always be something that everyone could comply with willingly and in full awareness. But what is required for that is that everyone involved should have a shared understanding of, and agreement on, the arrangement that will be for the welfare of all; or at least a common *view* as to the *principles* governing such an arrangement. And this is an impossibility. Even in very small and specific communities, it is close to impossible, though not *entirely* impossible.<sup>2</sup>

1 'you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed' - Bob Dylan

2 The requirement is pretty much that such a community should be a community of noble disciples; i.e. people who possess the Right View, one of the characteristics of which is 'seeing right as right and wrong as wrong'; another characteristic being that all not only have the same goal - liberation from birth, death and suffering- but the same understanding of how to achieve that goal. Note that this is absolutely NOT the same as a cult, in which people voluntarily deny their own individual point of view in favour of that of the group and the leader - in this, rather, each person has individually come to an understanding of certain fundamental principles that are timeless and universal, and each of them are individually also defined as 'independent of others.' Unlike a cult, for such individuals it is irrelevant whether they are alone or in a group, aside from practical convenience and similar considerations. But because their understanding pertains to something universal, they will naturally be 'on the same page' at least as far as important things go, without needing very much in the way of micro-managed rules to govern their behavior.

So practically always, at least some of the people will need some persuading, and even with much persuasion and propaganda, many people will need a degree of faith that the authority knows what is best for them better than they themselves do, or they will follow orders with a degree of skepticism and a degree of reluctance, just for the sake of not being harassed by the authority or by others.

## Owner of your actions

The first important point to understand regarding this is the following: no authority can *make* anyone do anything.

*Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, and have their actions as their refuge. - MN 135*

Nobody else can possibly be responsible for your own deed. All an authority can do is impose certain consequences for not acting according to their law; or offer certain rewards for acting according to their law. They can also (more underhandedly) choose to curtail or control people's access to information, or use other means to take advantage of people's inauthenticity so that although people appear to be doing something 'of their own accord'; in truth, almost nobody is genuinely taking responsibility for their own choice to do such and such thing, but rather acting out of fear or a sense of duty to do what they are 'supposed to be doing.'

Or, In the best case, if the authority has some wisdom, they can clearly and properly set forth, according to proper reasoning, why acting in such and such a way is for your welfare and benefit, acting in such and such ways is for your harm and the harm of others; so that you understand for yourself why it is better to act in this way and can take responsibility for that choice, without resenting the authority.<sup>3</sup>

So to re-emphasize, no authority can make anyone act in a particular way. All they can do is influence the consequences of acting in one way or another. Yet, for much of their lives, people end up doing lots of things - even most things - with the impression of being to some extent *obliged* to do them. What this impression practically involves is the belief that there *is no other choice*. In truth, though, there is always another choice to act differently - which will necessarily have consequences. Some are worse than others.

<sup>3</sup> Actually, if this is taken to its conclusion such an authority can't really be called 'an authority' in the usual sense of the word. The Buddha being the obvious example that comes to mind, who specifically stated on several occasions that it was not up to him whether people followed his instructions or not; and he particularly did *not* think of himself as an authority over the monks.

*But Ananda, what does the Sangha expect from me? I have taught the Dhamma, Ananda, having made no secret opposed to the public. The Perfected One has no closed teacher's fist with regard to teachings. If anyone thinks, 'I shall take charge of the Sangha,' or 'the Sangha should refer to me,' let him make some statement about the Sangha; but the Perfected One does not think in this way.) - DN 16.*

When somebody cannot bear so much as thinking about certain kinds of consequences, they habitually shut their eyes to the mere possibility of a whole range of actions that might provoke such consequences, and consequently, feel *obliged* to act in certain ways. (This is only part of the story, though, because while entertaining the possibility of an action with very unpleasant consequences is painful enough, it is still generally not as painful as having to face, time and time again, the need to make a decision 'what should I do?' with the full weight of that decision lying squarely on one's own shoulders.)

Being authentic involves refusing to allow yourself any notion of being obliged to do anything, and taking responsibility for every single choice you make. This is what will force you to be honest about why you are choosing one thing and not another. To take a common contemporary example, if somebody has doubts about a certain vaccine but happens to have a job for which the vaccine is mandatory, it would be easy for them to feel that they are being obliged to be vaccinated against their will; not acknowledging the fact that the choice to act differently is still open to them, though the consequences of it might be quite unpleasant to face. An authentic person would be able to reflect, for example, *I'm getting this vaccine because, although I don't trust that I have at hand all the relevant information, and I do think I could be taking a risk; on the whole, I still don't see this as justifying giving up my job while having children to support.* (It should of course be borne in mind that this is just one example for illustrative purposes, the reader may replace it with whatever equivalent example they can think of.)

## What is not yours

Perhaps slightly harder to understand, but equally important, is the point that not only are you solely responsible for your own actions, but you are responsible for; the owner of, *solely* your own actions - *nothing else*.

Anyone who has been born is subject to all sorts of changes, disturbances, and troubles that are *utterly inaccessible* to their control. The actions of other people, the quality and quantity of information you have access to, the words of other people, the conditions of the world; the weather, and the state of health and decline of your own body - all come under this. In other words, you can decide what you do; but that choice and the motivation for it is always strictly internal; there is no way for your choice to access things beyond it, just as there is no way for other things or people to access the domain of your own intentional choice.

Specifically, when you make a choice out of wanting to avoid a certain unpleasant result, or wanting to arrive at a certain pleasant result, any result that comes about whether it is experienced as pleasant or unpleasant - is in an entirely different domain. It happens, so to speak, by itself.

So for instance, in the example above, somebody might say 'But it's not *right* that they make vaccination mandatory for nurses, there *shouldn't* be this consequence for this kind of choice.' But these are quite clearly things that belong to others, and that pertains in fact to an entire domain that doesn't and cannot belong to you. Whether other people think and act rightly or wrongly, belongs to them; what belongs to you are, for instance, the words that you can say to them, but you can't give them anything more than the sound of your voice. Equally, in terms of your own body's health or sickness, all that you have is the ability to administer medicine and the possibility to investigate the causes of disease, but that is as far as it goes. Whether the medicine works and how it works, belongs to what is essentially the nature of matter, a different domain that is totally beyond your ability to access.

Thinking rightly or wrongly depends on the degree to which our thought corresponds to how things actually are. Whenever people act wrongly and harmfully, they are trying to exert control and mastery over things (like other people's actions) that can't possibly be controlled by them.

So an authority can at any time arbitrarily decide to impose restrictions and strictures on your own daily life whenever they so choose. If a person is bothered by this, although the change to their life might be troublesome in itself in various ways, what is truly bothersome is the fact that it should be possible at all. (That's when you hear people saying things like 'that shouldn't be allowed... we should be consulted... there should be some process or other...' etc.) But this comes back to why I began with this first point, which is something a person needs to see for themselves at least to some extent if any of this is to be comprehensible: to live as a human being (or indeed any kind of being) is to have *some* sort of authority over you. Such that the conditions of your life and the consequences of everyday actions may be suddenly changed at any moment.

So this bother is a recognition of something much more deep-rooted and universal, which is this very discrepancy I'm trying to get at: those things that one naturally takes to be one's own and holds dear, are fundamentally *not* one's own. (Because if some aspect of your life may be arbitrarily taken away by some authority or other, whether for valid reasons or not, then it must necessarily belong more to the authority than it does to you.)

*"I have sons, I have wealth."*

*Thus the fool frets.*

*He himself is not his own -.*

*How then, sons? How then, wealth? - Dhp 62*

Being a fundamental bother, pertaining to the nature of things in general, the only way to overcome it is to address it at this level. (rather than, say, taking up specific issues with the city council or what-have-you.)

This is done by, in a nutshell, learning how to stop mistakenly holding as your own those things which cannot be your own.

## How to let go of what isn't yours.

This phrase, 'let go of what isn't yours,' is repeated many times in the suttas, and is something that is repeated a lot in Buddhism generally. The problem is that at least most people if they try to simply *do* this directly, will probably end up doing it wrongly. (The reason being that they would be trying to 'let go' of things by way of the exact same attitude and view with which they were holding those things from the beginning. In other words, if it were really up to you whether to let go of something or to keep it, then we wouldn't have a problem. The point is to recognize that regardless of whether you let go or not, the thing was never yours, to begin with.)

That is why I have been emphasizing responsibility: it might seem paradoxical, but the most practical way to let go of futile suffering is to *first fully accept* all the responsibility wherever you possibly can - and never allow yourself to be obliged to act in any way. If a person were to genuinely take this as a practice and keep it in mind throughout everything they were to do, it would naturally become possible for them to give up the source of this bother (and ultimately the source of all bother whatsoever.)

One practical example of this at a relatively mundane level would follow from the one I gave above: if somebody took a vaccine while feeling obliged to do so, either because of a general sense of duty despite some misgivings, or even because it was mandatory for them to keep their job; if they later find out that the authority - who they deem responsible for *making* them take the vaccine - had not been honest, and/or the vaccine turns out to have worse side-effects than imagined, their mind will then definitely give rise to quite a lot of anger, frustration, and resentment.

But if somebody took a vaccine while being fully clear and authentic about their reasons for doing so, aware that they were taking a risk, and that they were choosing to do so because it was still overall the better choice rather than the available alternatives - then they might find out the exact same information, or even undergo some actual ill-effect of vaccination, but would suffer far less mental disturbance and turmoil on account of it. Nor would this make them any less capable of seeing and judging the immorality of the actions of the relevant authorities.

More generally, if you start correctly seeing the domain of your responsibility, this will also naturally make you more able to see where it ends; what is *not* in your hand and not up to you. This includes pretty much everything else, most pertinently the things that happen to you, and whether they are pleasant or unpleasant.

You could then recognize the following very important truth: that aversion, fear, or really any kind of *bother* regarding anything that can arise, is directly maintained by assuming that the painful thing *is* the situation, and so trying to deal with it, avoid it, get rid of it, etc - to get rid of the pain of it. (Incidentally, but importantly, it's also maintained by acting on the corresponding assumption regarding *pleasant* things, assuming that pleasure is to be found *in* a particular experience or situation; so I must get it, access it, experience it, have it.) In trying to deal with

things on this level, you keep maintaining the notion that you *could* have some say in the situation, that you can 'get at it'. Which is exactly how you allow things to 'get at you'.

An image that might help to convey this is a small room, with six windows or doors, and this room confines you, while you keep trying to get out of it. But each time you break down one of its windows or doors or try and go out to the thing you see passing outside, the initial release quickly reveals itself to be another - slightly smaller - version of the exact same room.

For as long as you keep trying to escape in that way, you will maintain the implicit assumption that this sort of escape *can* provide release. And you won't see how your escape attempts are what is making the room even smaller, the confinement even tighter, nor will it be possible to see the genuine release. And that is because the genuine release is not *outside* of the confinement, but more like a kind of reconfiguration of your vision so that you can see how the same thing is not confining at all anymore - precisely because you see that there is no need to escape in that way, *which was never possible to the begin with*.

In practical terms, it comes down, again, to realize that any suffering at all is never because of the situation, but purely because of the aversion or craving regarding it: an entirely unnecessary, futile, and gratuitous thing for which you are directly and solely responsible. Again, this sentence can be stated theoretically, but it has to be recognized through truly seeing that which is *not up to you*: whatever you do, in a fundamental sense your situation is always going its own way. It gets better sometimes, it gets worse sometimes. This would be how you can see that your only responsibility therein is also what is at the root of all that is painful and suffering in it, namely the craving, which is maintained *by trying to deal with the situation so as to get rid of the pain of it*. And if you were to see this you could let go of it, which is when you would not suffer albeit amidst the same circumstances that would previously have caused you much suffering.

## The extremity

It might be asked whether there is any limit to this principle. - I have said 'no matter what the situation!'; is this a figure of speech that in some extreme scenario no longer holds true? The answer is that there are no limits whatsoever to how far it *can* be taken, depending on how seriously one takes the fundamental problem of one's life and the degree of effort one is prepared to dedicate to the task of overcoming it. The suttas give many rather extreme examples of people who, having developed their minds along such lines, do not experience anguish, even amidst the worst kinds of suffering. My favorite is the story of a laywoman called 'Nanda's mother,' who recounts the following:

*I had an only son called Nanda who was dear and pleasing to me. The rulers forcibly abducted him on some pretext and had him executed. But when my son was under arrest or being arrested, imprisoned or being put in prison, killed or being killed, I cannot recall any change in the state of my mind." - AN 7.53.*

This might seem initially like a totally incomprehensible or impossible feat, only explicable by some sort of mystical or magical transformation of a person into some sort of robot. (And many Buddhists do end up taking it like this, though they might not admit it). But it is simply the result of the same principle as we have been describing being applied and developed to its full extent.

From a slightly different angle, if one takes responsibility for choosing to live in the domain of a certain authority that one considers to be oppressive, then the first natural reaction is to search for a different place where there will be a less oppressive authority in charge. But still, as I said, one will have to live under some authority or another; and this principle has no limit: here is a passage from the suttas spoken by Mara, who in the suttas is a deity who holds the position of a top bureaucrat over the system of samsara, (by which he is equally fully bound).

*“The eye is mine, ascetic, forms are mine, eye-contact and its base of consciousness are mine. Where can you go, ascetic, to escape from me? The ear is mine, ascetic, sounds are mine ... The nose is mine, ascetic, odors are mine ... The tongue is mine, ascetic, tastes are mine ... The body is mine, ascetic, tactile objects are mine ... The mind is mine, ascetic, mental phenomena are mine, mind-contact and its base of consciousness are mine. Where can you go, ascetic, to escape from me?” - SN 4.19*

In another sense, pertinently, Mara is also called the King of Death, and this could be taken in a very literal sense. To be in the realm of Mara is to be subject to old age and death. That is what holds sway over the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. That is the ultimate authority. And the escape from it is still the same.

*“That of which they say ‘It’s mine,’  
And those who speak in terms of ‘mine’—  
If your mind exists among these,  
You won’t escape me, ascetic.”*

*The Blessed One:  
“That which they speak of is not mine,  
I’m not one of those who speak of mine.  
You should know thus, O Evil One:  
Even my path you will not see.” - SN 4.19*

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